Frommer's® PORTABLE

Las Vegas

VISIT…

Frommer's®

PORTABLE

Las Vegas

9th Edition

by Mary Herczog

Here's what critics say about Frommer's:

"Amazingly easy to use. Very portable, very complete."

—Booklist

"Detailed, accurate, and easy-to-read information for all price ranges."

—Glamour Magazine

Wiley Publishing, Inc.

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—Mary Herczog

About the Author

Mary Herczog lives in Los Angeles and works in the film industry while also attending graduate school. She is the author of *Frommer's New Orleans, California For Dummies, Frommer's Las Vegas, Las Vegas Day by Day,* and *Las Vegas For Dummies,* and she has contributed to *Frommer's Los Angeles.* Craps make her nervous, so she sticks to blackjack—even though she is never sure when to hit on 13.

An Invitation to the Reader

In researching this book, we discovered many wonderful places—hotels, restaurants, shops, and more. We're sure you'll find others. Please tell us about them, so we can share the information with your fellow travelers in upcoming editions. If you were disappointed with a recommendation, we'd love to know that, too. Please write to:

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An Additional Note

Please be advised that travel information is subject to change at any time—and this is especially true of prices. We therefore suggest that you write or call ahead for confirmation when making your travel plans. The authors, editors, and publisher cannot be held responsible for the experiences of readers while traveling. Your safety is important to us, however, so we encourage you to stay alert and be aware of your surroundings. Keep a close eye on cameras, purses, and wallets, all favorite targets of thieves and pickpockets.

Frommer's Star Ratings, Icons & Abbreviations

Every hotel, restaurant, and attraction listing in this guide has been ranked for quality, value, service, amenities, and special features using a **star-rating system.** In country, state, and regional guides, we also rate towns and regions to help you narrow down your choices and budget your time accordingly. Hotels and restaurants are rated on a scale of zero (recommended) to three stars (exceptional). Attractions, shopping, nightlife, towns, and regions are rated according to the following scale: zero stars (recommended), one star (highly recommended), two stars (very highly recommended), and three stars (must-see).

In addition to the star-rating system, we also use **seven feature icons** that point you to the great deals, in-the-know advice, and unique experiences that separate travelers from tourists. Throughout the book, look for:

Finds	Special finds—those places only insiders know about
Fun Fact	Fun facts—details that make travelers more informed and their trips more fun
Kids	Best bets for kids—advice for the whole family
Moments	Special moments—those experiences that memories are made of
Overrated	Places or experiences not worth your time or money
Tips	Insider tips—some great ways to save time and money
Value	Great values—where to get the best deals

The following abbreviations are used for credit cards:

AE American Express	DISC Discover	V Visa
DC Diners Club	MC MasterCard	

Frommers.com

Now that you have this guidebook to help you plan a great trip, visit our website at **www.frommers.com** for additional travel information on more than 3,600 destinations. We update features regularly to give you instant access to the most current trip-planning information available. At Frommers.com, you'll find scoops on the best airfares, lodging rates, and car rental bargains. You can even book your travel online through our reliable travel booking partners. Other popular features include:

- Online updates of our most popular guidebooks
- Vacation sweepstakes and contest giveaways
- Newsletters highlighting the hottest travel trends
- Online travel message boards with featured travel discussions

1

Planning Your Trip to Las Vegas

In the pages that follow, you'll find everything you need to know to handle the practical details of planning your trip: airlines and area airports, a calendar of events, a list of conventions you may want to avoid, resources for those with special needs, and much more.

We also suggest that you check out chapter 8, "Las Vegas After Dark," before you leave home; if you want to see the most popular shows, it's a good idea to call ahead and order tickets well in advance to avoid disappointment. (Ditto if you want to dine in one of the city's top restaurants; head to chapter 4, "Where to Dine," for full reviews and contact information.)

1 Visitor Information

For advance information, call or write the **Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority,** 3150 Paradise Rd., Las Vegas, NV 89109 (✆ **877/VISIT-LV** or 702/892-0711; www.visitlasvegas.com). They can send you a comprehensive packet containing brochures, a map, a show guide, an events calendar, and an attractions list; help you find a hotel (and even make reservations); and tell you whether a major convention is scheduled during the time you'd like to visit. Or stop by when you're in town. They're open daily from 9am to 5pm.

Another excellent information source is the **Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce,** 3720 Howard Hughes Pkwy., #100, Las Vegas, NV 89109 (✆ **702/735-1616;** www.lvchamber.com). Ask them to send you their *Visitor Guide,* which contains extensive information about accommodations, attractions, excursions, children's activities, and more. They can answer all your Vegas questions. They're open Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm.

Tips Getting Cash

Don't worry about running short on cash while in Las Vegas. ATMs practically carpet the city; no one wants you to find yourself without cash you could lose in a slot machine! Beware of withdrawal charges, though, which can often run as high as $3 (the highest charges are usually for commercial machines in convenience stores and hotel lobbies).

For information on all of Nevada, including Las Vegas, contact the **Nevada Commission on Tourism** (✆ **800/638-2328;** www.travelnevada.com). They'll send you a comprehensive information packet on Nevada.

2 When to Go

Most of a Las Vegas vacation is spent indoors; you can have a good time here year-round. The most pleasant seasons are spring and fall, especially if you want to experience the great outdoors.

Weekdays are slightly less crowded than weekends. Holidays are always a mob scene and come accompanied by high hotel prices. Hotel prices also skyrocket when big conventions and special events are taking place. The slowest times of year are June and July, the week before Christmas, and the week after New Year's.

If a major convention is to be held during your trip, you might want to change your date. Check the box below for convention dates, and contact the **Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority** (✆ **877/VISIT-LV** or 702/892-7575; www.visitlasvegas.com), as convention schedules often change.

THE WEATHER

First of all, Vegas isn't always hot, but when it is hot, it's *really* hot. Still, the dry desert heat is not unbearable. The unfortunate exception is most of the hotel pool areas—they are surrounded by massive hotels covered in mirrored glass, which acts as a giant magnifying glass, focusing the sun's rays on the people below. Generally the humidity averages a low 22%, and there's almost always a breeze. Also, barring the hottest summer days, there's relief at night when temperatures often drop by at least 20°F (11°C).

Moments New Year's Eve in Las Vegas

Over the past couple years, more and more people have been choosing Las Vegas as their party destination for New Year's Eve. Although not quite a rival, in terms of sheer numbers, for New York City's Times Square, the Strip has become a major destination for New Year's Eve revelers.

From experience, we can tell you that a lot of people (we mean *a lot*) come here on December 31. Traffic is a nightmare, parking is next to impossible, and it feels like every square inch of the place is occupied by a human being. Las Vegas doesn't really need a reason to throw a party, but when an event like this comes along, they do it up right. A major portion of the Strip is closed down, sending the masses and their substantial quantities of alcohol into the street. Each year's celebration is a little different but usually includes a street-side performance by a major celebrity, confetti, the obligatory countdown, and fireworks.

Las Vegas's Average Temperatures (°F/°C) & Precipitation

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Avg. Temp. (°F)	47	52	58	66	75	86	91	89	81	69	55	47
Avg. Temp. (°C)	8	11	14	19	24	30	33	32	27	21	13	8
Avg. High Temp. (°F)	57	63	69	78	88	99	104	102	94	81	66	57
Avg. High Temp. (°C)	14	17	21	26	31	37	40	39	34	27	19	14
Avg. Low Temp. (°F)	37	41	47	54	63	72	78	77	69	57	44	37
Avg. Low Temp. (°C)	3	5	8	12	17	22	26	25	21	14	7	3
Avg. Precip. (in.)	0.59	0.69	0.59	0.15	0.24	0.08	0.44	0.45	0.31	0.24	0.31	0.40
Avg. Precip. (cm)	1.5	1.8	1.5	0.4	0.6	0.2	1.1	1.1	0.8	0.6	0.8	1.0

But this is the desert, and it's not boiling all year-round. Las Vegas can get quite cold, especially in the winter, nighttime temperatures can drop to 30°F (–1°C) and lower. The winter breeze can also become a cold, biting, strong wind of up to 40 mph or more. And so there are entire portions of the year when you won't be using that hotel swimming pool at all (even if you want to—be aware that most of the hotels close huge chunks of those fabulous swimming pool areas for "the season," which can be as long as from Labor Day to Memorial Day). If you aren't traveling at the height of summer, bring a wrap. Also, remember your sunscreen and hat—even if it's not all that hot, you can burn very easily and very fast.

Major Convention Dates for 2008

Listed below are Las Vegas's major annual conventions with projected attendance figures for 2008; believe us, you probably want to avoid the biggies. Because convention schedules frequently change, contact the **Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority** (✆ **877/VISIT-LV** or 702/892-7575; www.visitlasvegas.com) to double-check the latest info before you commit to your travel dates.

Event	Dates	Expected Attendance
Consumer Electronics Show	Jan 8–11	185,000
World of Concrete Exposition	Jan 23–26	80,000
World Market Center	Jan 29–Feb 2	65,000
Associated Surplus Dealers	Feb 25–Mar 1	62,000
National Association of Broadcasters (NAB)	Apr 16–19	110,000
Associated Surplus Dealers	Aug 12–16	60,000
Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA)	Oct 30–Nov 2	120,000

3 Money-Saving Package Deals

Before you start your search for the lowest airfare, you may want to consider booking your flight as part of a travel package. Package tours are simply a way to buy the airfare, accommodations, and other elements of your trip (such as car rentals, airport transfers, and sometimes even activities) at the same time and often at discounted prices. Las Vegas is a very popular package destination, so it pays to shop around to get the best deal.

One good source of package deals is the airlines themselves. Most major airlines offer air/land packages, including **American Airlines Vacations** (✆ 800/321-2121; www.aavacations.com), **Delta Vacations** (✆ 800/654-6559; www.deltavacations.com), **Continental Airlines Vacations** (✆ 800/301-3800; www.covacations.com), **Southwest Airlines** (✆ **800/435-9792;** www.southwest.com), and **United Vacations** (✆ 888/854-3899; www.unitedvacations.com). Several big **online travel agencies**—Expedia, Travelocity, Orbitz, Site59, and Lastminute.com—also do a brisk business in packages.

Travel packages are also listed in the travel section of your local Sunday newspaper. Or check ads in the national travel magazines such as *Budget Travel Magazine, Travel + Leisure, National Geographic Traveler,* and *Condé Nast Traveler.*

Before you invest in a package deal, always ask about the **cancellation policy** and **accommodations choices,** and look for **hidden expenses,** such as taxes.

4 Getting There

BY PLANE

Given the shambles the airline industry is in, writing this section makes us wince. Be aware that the future of some of the following airlines was in varying degrees of doubt as we went to press.

The following airlines have regularly scheduled flights into Las Vegas (some of these are regional carriers, so they may not all fly from your point of origin): **AeroMexico** (✆ 800/237-6639; www.aeromexico.com); **Air Canada** (✆ 800/776-3000; www.aircanada.ca); **Alaska Airlines** (✆ 800/426-0333; www.alaskaair.com); **Allegiant Air** (✆ 877/202-6444; www.allegiantair.com); **Aloha Air** (✆ 800/367-5250; www.alohaairlines.com); **American/American Eagle** (✆ 800/433-7300; www.aa.com); **American Trans Air** (✆ 800/435-9282; www.ata.com); **Continental** (✆ 800/525-0280; www.continental.com); **Delta/Skywest** (✆ 800/221-1212; www.delta.com); **Frontier Airlines** (✆ 800/432-1359; www.flyfrontier.com); **Harmony Airways** (✆ 866/248-6789; www.hmyairways.com); **Hawaiian Airlines** (✆ 800/367-5320; www.hawaiianair.com); **Japan Airlines** (✆ 800/525-3663; www.jal.co.jp/en); **JetBlue** (✆ 800/538-2583; www.jetblue.com); **Mexicana Airlines** (✆ 800/531-7921; www.mexicana.com); **Midwest Airlines** (✆ 800/452-2022; www.midwestairlines.com); **Northwest Airlines** (✆ 800/225-2525; www.nwa.com); **Philippine Airlines** (✆ 800/435-9725; www.philippineairlines.com); **Southwest Airlines** (✆ 800/435-9792; www.southwest.com); **Spirit Airlines** (✆ 800/772-7117; www.spiritair.com); **Ted Airlines** (✆ 800/225-5833; www.flyted.com); **United Air Lines** (✆ 800/241-6522; www.united.com); **US Airways** (✆ 800/428-4322; www.usairways.com); and **Virgin Atlantic Airways** (✆ 800/862-8621; www.virgin-atlantic.com).

You can also search the **Internet** for cheap fares. The most popular online travel agencies are **Travelocity.com** (www.travelocity.co.uk); **Expedia.com** (www.expedia.co.uk and www.expedia.ca); and

Orbitz.com. In the U.K., go to **Travelsupermarket** (✆ **0845/345-5708;** www.travelsupermarket.com), a flight search engine that offers flight comparisons for the budget airlines whose seats often end up in bucket-shop sales. Other websites for booking airline tickets online include **Cheapflights.com**, **SmarterTravel.com**, **Priceline.com**, and **Opodo** (www.opodo.co.uk). Meta search sites (which find and then direct you to airline and hotel websites for booking) include **Sidestep.com** and **Kayak.com**—the latter includes fares for budget carriers, such as JetBlue and Spirit, as well as the major airlines.

BY CAR

The main highway connecting Las Vegas with the rest of the country is I-15; it links Montana, Idaho, and Utah with Southern California. The drive from Los Angeles is popular and, thanks to the narrow two-lane highway, can get very crowded on Friday and Sunday afternoons as weekend gamblers make their way to and from Las Vegas. An expansion project is widening most of that stretch of road to three lanes in each direction, but until that project is complete, expect construction delays and often dangerous road conditions.

From the east, take I-70 or I-80 west to Kingman, Arizona, and then U.S. 93 north to Downtown Las Vegas (Fremont St.). From the south, take I-10 west to Phoenix and then U.S. 93 north to Las Vegas. From San Francisco, take I-80 east to Reno and then U.S. 95 south to Las Vegas. If you're driving to Las Vegas, be sure to read the driving precautions in "Getting Around" in chapter 2.

Vegas is 286 miles from Phoenix, 759 miles from Denver, 421 miles from Salt Lake City, 269 miles from Los Angeles, and 586 miles from San Francisco.

BY TRAIN

Amtrak (✆ **800/USA-RAIL;** www.amtrak.com) does not currently offer direct rail service, although plans have been in the works to restore the rails between Los Angeles and Las Vegas for years. At press time, Amtrak wouldn't confirm a date, but various reports have indicated that eventually they will restore service using the **Talgo.** This European-designed "Casino Train" will complete the trip from Los Angeles in about 5½ hours, with a wholesale seat price of $99 round-trip. We've been hearing these reports for so long now, they just make us roll our eyes, but if and when this ever happens, you will have to fight us for a seat. In the meantime, you can take the train to Los Angeles or Barstow, and Amtrak will get you to Las Vegas by bus.

2 Getting to Know Las Vegas

Located in the southernmost precincts of a wide, pancake-flat valley, Las Vegas is the biggest city in the state of Nevada. Treeless mountains form a scenic backdrop to hotels awash in neon glitter. Although it is one of the fastest-growing cities in America, for tourism purposes, the city is quite compact.

1 Orientation

ARRIVING AT THE LAS VEGAS AIRPORT

Las Vegas is served by **McCarran International Airport,** 5757 Wayne Newton Blvd. (✆ **702/261-5211,** TTY 702/261-3111; www.mccarran.com), just a few minutes' drive from the southern end of the Strip, where the bulk of casinos and hotels are concentrated. This big, modern airport—even bigger thanks to a $500-million expansion—is rather exceptional in that it includes several casino areas with more than 1,000 slot machines. Although these are reputed to offer lower paybacks than hotel casinos (the airport has a captive audience and doesn't need to lure repeat customers), it's hard to resist throwing in a few quarters while waiting for the luggage to arrive. We actually know someone who hit a $250 jackpot there on his way out of town, thereby recouping most of his gambling losses at the last possible moment, and putting a lie to our insistence that such wagers are sucker bets.

Getting to your hotel from the airport is a cinch. **Bell Trans** (✆ **800/274-7433** or 702/739-7990; www.bell-trans.com) runs 20-passenger minibuses daily between the airport and all major Las Vegas hotels and motels (7:45am–midnight). Several other companies run similar ventures—just stand outside on the curb, and one will be flagged down for you. Buses from the airport leave about every 10 minutes. When you want to check out of your hotel and head back to the airport, call at least 2 hours in advance to be safe (though often you can just flag down one of the buses outside any major hotel). The cost is $5 per person each way to Strip- and Convention Center–area hotels, $6.50 to Downtown or other Off-Strip

properties (anyplace north of the Sahara Hotel and west of I-15). Other similarly priced shuttles run 24 hours and can be found in the same place.

Even less expensive are **Citizens Area Transit (CAT)** buses (✆ **702/CAT-RIDE;** www.rtcsouthernnevada.com/cat). The no. 108 bus departs from the airport and takes you to the Stratosphere, where you can transfer to the no. 301, which stops close to most Strip- and Convention Center–area hotels. The no. 109 bus goes from the airport to the Downtown Transportation Center (at Casino Center Blvd. and Stewart Ave.). The fares for buses on Strip routes are $2 for adults, 60¢ for seniors and children 6 to 17, and free for children under 6. ***Note:*** You might have a long walk from the bus stop to the hotel entrance, even if the bus stop is right in front of your hotel. Vans are able to get right up to the entrance, so choose a van if you're lugging lots of baggage.

All the major car-rental companies are represented in Las Vegas. For a list of agencies and more information on getting a good deal on a rental, see "Getting Around," below.

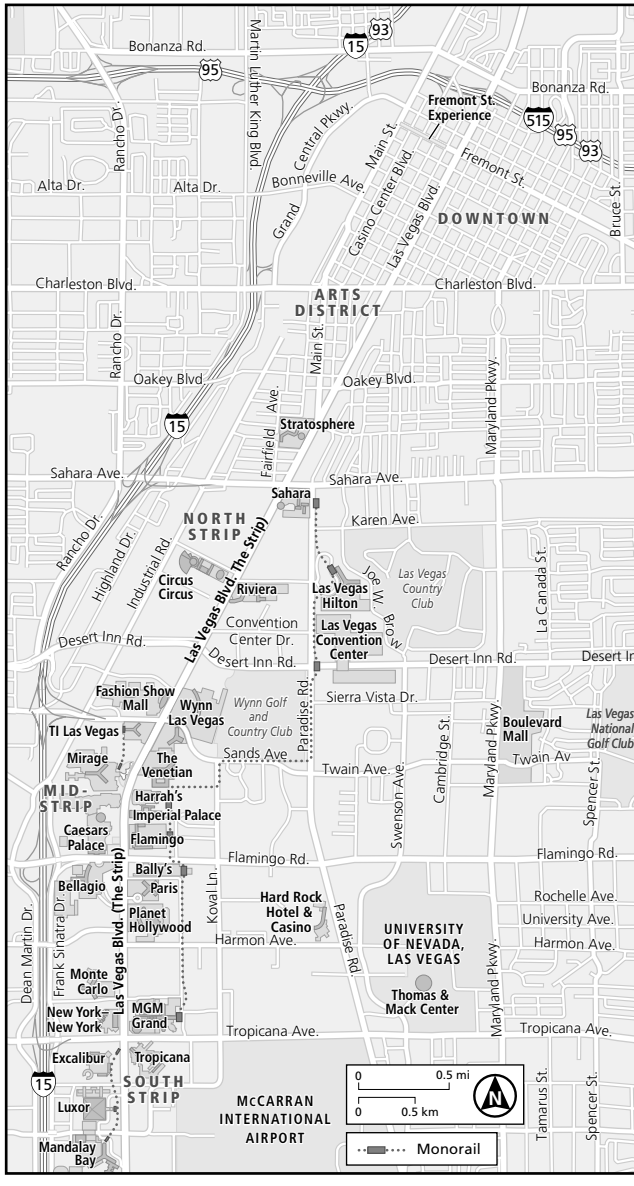
VISITOR INFORMATION

All major Las Vegas hotels provide comprehensive tourist information at their reception and/or sightseeing and show desks.

Other good information sources are the **Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority,** 3150 Paradise Rd., Las Vegas, NV 89109 (✆ **877/VISIT-LV** or 702/892-7575; www.visitlasvegas.com), open daily from 9am to 5pm; the **Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce,** 3720 Howard Hughes Pkwy., #100, Las Vegas, NV 89109 (✆ **702/735-1616;** www.lvchamber.com), open Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm; and, for information on all of Nevada, including Las Vegas, the **Nevada Commission on Tourism** (✆ **800/638-2328;** www.travelnevada.com), open 24 hours.

CITY LAYOUT

There are two main areas of Las Vegas: the **Strip** and **Downtown.** For many people, that's all there is to Las Vegas. But there is actually more to the town than that: Although maybe not as glitzy and glamorous as the Strip and Downtown—okay, definitely not—Paradise Road and east Las Vegas are home to quite a bit of casino action, Maryland Parkway boasts mainstream and alternative-culture shopping, and there are different restaurant choices all over the city. Confining yourself to the Strip and Downtown is fine for the first-time visitor, but repeat customers (and you will be) should get out and explore. Las Vegas Boulevard South (the Strip) is the starting point


Bonanza Rd.
Martin Luther King Blvd.
Central Pkwy.
Main St.
Fremont St. Experience
Fremont St.
Bonneville Ave
Grand
Casino Center Blvd.
Las Vegas Blvd.
DOWNTOWN
Bruce St.
Alta Dr.
Rancho Dr.
Charleston Blvd.
ARTS DISTRICT
Oakey Blvd
Maryland Pkwy.
Fairfield Ave.
Stratosphere
Sahara Ave.
Sahara
Karen Ave.
NORTH STRIP
Las Vegas Blvd. (The Strip)
Highland Dr.
Industrial Rd.
Circus Circus
Riviera
Las Vegas Hilton
Las Vegas Country Club
Convention Center Dr.
Las Vegas Convention Center
Desert Inn Rd.
La Canada St.
Fashion Show Mall
Wynn Las Vegas
Wynn Golf and Country Club
Paradise Rd.
Sierra Vista Dr.
Boulevard Mall
Las Vegas National Golf Club
TI Las Vegas
Mirage
The Venetian
Sands Ave.
Twain Ave.
Cambridge St.
Swenson St.
Twain Av
Spencer St.
MID-STRIP
Harrah's
Imperial Palace
Caesars Palace
Flamingo
Flamingo Rd.
Bally's
Paris
Bellagio
Koval Ln.
Hard Rock Hotel & Casino
Rochelle Ave.
University Ave.
Planet Hollywood
Harmon Ave.
UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS
Dean Martin Dr.
Frank Sinatra Dr.
Monte Carlo
New York–New York
MGM Grand
Thomas & Mack Center
Tropicana Ave.
Excalibur
Tropicana
Luxor
SOUTH STRIP
McCARRAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT
Mandalay Bay
Tamarus St.
0 0.5 mi
0 0.5 km
Monorail

for addresses; any street crossing it will start with 1 East and 1 West (and go up from there) at its intersection with the Strip.

THE STRIP

The Strip is probably the most famous 4-mile stretch of highway in the nation. Officially called Las Vegas Boulevard South, it contains most of the top hotels in town and offers almost all of the major showroom entertainment. First-time visitors will, and probably should, spend the bulk of their time on the Strip. If mobility is a problem, we suggest basing yourself in a South or Mid-Strip location.

For the purposes of organizing this book, we've divided the Strip into three sections. The **South Strip** can be roughly defined as the portion of the Strip south of Harmon Avenue, including the MGM Grand, Mandalay Bay, the Monte Carlo, New York–New York, Luxor, and many more hotels and casinos.

Mid-Strip is a long stretch of the street between Harmon Avenue and Spring Mountain Road, including Bellagio, Caesars, The Mirage and TI–Treasure Island, Bally's, Paris Las Vegas, The Flamingo Las Vegas, and Harrah's, among other hotels and casinos.

The **North Strip** stretches north from Spring Mountain Road all the way to the Stratosphere Casino Hotel & Tower and includes Wynn Las Vegas, Stardust, Sahara, The Riviera, and Circus Circus, to name a few of the accommodations and attractions.

EAST OF THE STRIP/CONVENTION CENTER

This area has grown up around the Las Vegas Convention Center. Las Vegas is one of the nation's top convention cities, attracting around 3 million conventioneers each year. The major hotel in this section is the Las Vegas Hilton, but Marriott has a big presence here and the Hard Rock Hotel is a major draw. You'll find many smaller chain/name-brand hotels and motels southward, along Paradise Road. All these hotels offer proximity to the Strip.

DOWNTOWN

Also known as **"Glitter Gulch"** (narrower streets make the neon seem brighter), Downtown Las Vegas, which is centered on Fremont Street between Main and 9th streets, was the first section of the city to develop hotels and casinos. With the exception of the Golden Nugget, which looks like it belongs in Monte Carlo, this area has traditionally been more casual than the Strip. But with the advent of the **Fremont Street Experience** (p. 101), Downtown has experienced a revitalization. The area is clean, the crowds are low-key and friendly, and the light show overhead is as ostentatious as anything

on the Strip. Don't overlook this area. Las Vegas Boulevard runs all the way into Fremont Street Downtown.

2 Getting Around

It shouldn't be too hard to navigate your way around. But remember, between huge hotel acreage, increased and very slow traffic, and lots and lots of people trying to explore like you, getting around takes a lot longer than you might think. Heck, it can take 15 to 20 minutes to get from your room to another part of your hotel! Always allow for plenty of time to get from point A to point B.

BY CAR

We highly recommend that visitors rent a car. The Strip is too spread out for walking (and Las Vegas is often too hot or too cold to make strolls pleasant), Downtown is too far away for a cheap cab ride, and public transportation (at least until the monorail is finished) is often ineffective in getting you from point A to point B. Plus, return visits call for exploration in more remote parts of the city, and a car brings freedom, especially if you want to do any side trips at your own pace.

You should note that places with addresses some 60 blocks east or west from the Strip are actually less than a 10-minute drive—provided there is no traffic.

Having advocated renting a car, we should warn you that traffic is getting worse, and it's harder and harder to get around town with any certain swiftness. A general rule of thumb is to avoid driving on the Strip whenever you can, and avoid driving at all during peak rush hours (8–9:30am and 4:30–6pm), especially if you have to make a show curtain.

Parking is usually a pleasure because all casino hotels offer free valet service. That means that for a mere $1-to-$2 tip, you can park right at the door, though the valet usually fills up on busy nights. In those cases, you can use the gigantic self-parking lots that all hotels have.

RENTING A CAR

National companies with outlets in Las Vegas include **Alamo** (✆ 877/227-8367; www.goalamo.com), **Avis** (✆ 800/230-4898; www.avis.com), **Budget** (✆ 800/527-0700; www.budget.com), **Dollar** (✆ 800/800-3665; www.dollar.com), **Enterprise** (✆ 800/736-8227; www.enterprise.com), **Hertz** (✆ 800/654-3131; www.hertz.com), **National** (✆ 800/227-7368; www.nationalcar.com),

Payless (✆ 800/729-5377; www.paylesscarrental.com), and **Thrifty** (✆ 800/847-4389; www.thrifty.com).

DRIVING SAFETY

Because driving on the outskirts of Las Vegas—for example, coming from California—involves desert driving, you must take certain precautions. It's a good idea to check your tires, water, and oil before leaving. Take at least 5 gallons of water in a clean container that can be used for either drinking or the radiator. Pay attention to road signs that suggest when to turn off your car's air conditioner. And don't push your luck with gas—it may be 35 miles or more between stations. If your car overheats, do not remove the radiator cap until the engine has cooled, and then remove it very slowly. Add water to within an inch of the top of the radiator.

BY TAXI

Because cabs line up in front of all major hotels, an easy way to get around town is by taxi. Cabs charge $3.20 at the meter drop and 25¢ for each additional ⅛ mile, plus an additional $1.20 fee for being picked up at the airport and time-based penalties if you get stuck in a traffic jam. A taxi from the airport to the Strip will run you $12 to $20, from the airport to Downtown $15 to $20, and between the Strip and Downtown about $10 to $15. You can often save money by sharing a cab with someone going to the same destination (up to five people can ride for the same fare).

If you just can't find a taxi to hail and want to call one, try the following companies: **Desert Cab Company** (✆ **702/386-9102**), **Whittlesea Blue Cab** (✆ **702/384-6111**), or **Yellow/Checker Cab/Star Company** (✆ **702/873-2000**).

BY MONORAIL

The first leg of a high-tech monorail opened in 2004, offering riders their first and best shot of getting from one end of the Strip to the other with a minimum of frustration and expense. The 4-mile route runs from the MGM Grand at the southern end of the Strip to the Sahara at the northern end, with stops at Paris/Bally's, The Flamingo, Harrah's, the Las Vegas Convention Center, and the Las Vegas Hilton along the way. Note that some of the actual physical stops are not geographically close to their namesakes, so there can be an unexpected—and sometimes time-consuming—additional walk from the monorail stop to wherever you intended to go. Factor in this time accordingly.

These trains can accommodate more than 200 passengers (standing and sitting) and make the end-to-end run in about 15 minutes. They operate Monday through Thursday from 7am until 2am and Friday through Sunday from 7am until 3am. Fares are $5 (!!!) for a one-way ride (whether you ride from one end to the other or just to the next station); discounts are available for round-trips and multiride/multiday passes.

FREE TRANSPORTATION

There are a number of free transportation services, courtesy of the casinos. A free monorail connects Mandalay Bay with Luxor and Excalibur, and a free tram shuttles between The Mirage and TI–Treasure Island. Given how far apart even neighboring hotels can be, thanks to their size, and how they seem even farther apart on really hot (and cold and windy) days, these are blessed additions.

FAST FACTS: Las Vegas

Area Codes The area code for Las Vegas is **702.**

Babysitters Contact **Around the Clock Child Care** (✆ **800/798-6768** or 702/365-1040). In business since 1987, this reputable company clears its sitters with the health department, the sheriff, and the FBI and carefully screens references. Charges are $70 for 4 hours for one or two children, $15 for each additional hour, with surcharges for additional children and on holidays. Sitters are on call 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, and they will come to your hotel. Call at least 3 hours in advance.

Banks Banks are generally open from 9 or 10am to 5 and sometimes 6pm, and most have Saturday hours. ATMs are plentiful all around town. Note also that most casino cashiers will cash personal checks and can exchange foreign currency, and just about every casino has a machine that will provide cash on a wide variety of credit cards.

Conventions Las Vegas is one of America's top convention destinations. Much of the action takes place at the **Las Vegas Convention Center,** 3150 Paradise Rd., Las Vegas, NV 89109 (✆ **702/892-7575**), which is the largest single-level convention center in the world. Its 3.2 million square feet include 144 meeting rooms. And this immense facility is augmented by the **Cashman Field Center,** 850 Las Vegas Blvd. N., Las Vegas, NV 89101 (✆ **702/386-7100**). Under the same auspices, Cashman

provides another 100,000 square feet of convention space. Additionally, there are massive convention facilities at many of the big hotels, including the MGM Grand, The Mirage, Mandalay Bay, The Venetian, and more.

Doctors Hotels usually have lists of doctors should you need one. In addition, they are listed in the Yellow Pages. See also "Hospitals," below.

For physician referrals, call the **Desert Springs Hospital** (✆ **702/388-4888;** www.desertspringshospital.net). Hours are Monday to Friday from 8am to 8pm and Saturday from 9am to 3pm.

Emergencies Dial ✆ **911** to contact the police or fire department or to call an ambulance.

Hospitals Emergency services are available 24 hours a day at **University Medical Center,** 1800 W. Charleston Blvd., at Shadow Lane (✆ **702/383-2000;** www.umc-cares.org); the emergency-room entrance is on the corner of Hastings and Rose streets. **Sunrise Hospital and Medical Center,** 3186 Maryland Pkwy., between Desert Inn Road and Sahara Avenue (✆ **702/731-8080;** www.sunrisehospital.com), also has a 24-hour emergency room.

For more minor problems, try the **Harmon Medical Urgent Care Center,** the closest to the Strip, with doctors and X-ray machines; it's located at 105 E. Harmon at Koval, near the MGM Grand (✆ **702/796-1116;** www.harmonmedicalcenter.com). It's open 24 hours, and there is a pharmacy on-site.

Hot Lines Emergency hot lines include the **Rape Crisis Center** (✆ **702/366-1640**), **Suicide Prevention** (✆ **702/731-2990**), and **Poison Emergencies** (✆ **800/446-6179**).

Liquor & Gambling Laws You must be 21 to drink or gamble; proof of age is required and often requested at bars, nightclubs, and restaurants, so it's always a good idea to bring ID when you go out, especially if you look young. There are no closing hours in Las Vegas for the sale or consumption of alcohol, even on Sunday.

Do not carry open containers of alcohol in a car or any public area that isn't zoned for alcohol consumption. Note that it is also forbidden to have an open container of alcohol in a vehicle, even if you're the passenger. The Strip and Fremont Street in Downtown Las Vegas are the only areas in town where you can have open containers on public sidewalks;

otherwise, the police can fine you on the spot. And don't even think about driving while intoxicated.

Lost & Found Be sure to tell all of your credit card companies the minute you discover your wallet has been lost or stolen, and file a report at the nearest police precinct. Your credit card company or insurer may require a police report number or record of the loss. Most credit card companies have an emergency toll-free number to call if your card is lost or stolen; they may be able to wire you a cash advance immediately or deliver an emergency credit card in a day or two. Visa's U.S. emergency number is ✆ **800/847-2911** or 410/581-9994. American Express cardholders and traveler's check holders should call ✆ **800/221-7282.** MasterCard holders should call ✆ **800/307-7309** or 636/722-7111. For other credit cards, call the toll-free number directory at ✆ **800/555-1212.**

Newspapers & Periodicals There are two Las Vegas dailies: the *Las Vegas Review Journal* and the *Las Vegas Sun.* The *Review Journal*'s Friday edition has a helpful "Weekend" section with a comprehensive guide to shows and buffets. There are two free alternative papers, with club listings and many unbiased restaurant and bar reviews. Both *City Life* and *Las Vegas Weekly* are published weekly. All can be viewed online at their respective websites. Moreover, at every hotel desk, you'll find dozens of free local magazines, such as *Vegas Visitor, What's On in Las Vegas, Showbiz Weekly,* and *Where to Go in Las Vegas,* that are chock-full of helpful information—although probably of the sort that comes from paid advertising.

Parking Free valet parking is one of the great pleasures of Las Vegas and well worth the $1 or $2 tip (given when the car is returned) to save walking a city block from the far reaches of a hotel parking lot, particularly when the temperature is over 100°F (38°C). Another summer plus: The valet will turn on your air-conditioning so that you don't have to get into an "oven on wheels."

Pharmacies There's a 24-hour **Walgreens** (which also has 1-hr. photo processing) at 3763 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (✆ **702/739-9638;** www.walgreens.com), almost directly across from the Monte Carlo. **CVS** is a large 24-hour pharmacy close to the Strip at 1360 E. Flamingo Rd., at Maryland Parkway (✆ **702/731-5373;** www.cvs.com). **White Cross Drugs,** 1700 Las Vegas

Blvd. S. (✆ **702/382-1733**), will make pharmacy deliveries to your hotel during the day.

Police For nonemergencies, call ✆ **702/795-3111.** For emergencies, call ✆ **911.**

Post Office The most convenient post office is immediately behind the Stardust Hotel at 3100 Industrial Rd., between Sahara Avenue and Spring Mountain Road (✆ **800/275-8777**). It's open Monday to Friday from 8:30am to 5pm. You can also mail letters and packages at your hotel, and there's a full-service U.S. Post Office in the Forum Shops in Caesars Palace.

Safety In Las Vegas, vast amounts of money are always on display, and criminals find many easy marks. Don't be one of them. At gaming tables and slot machines, men should keep wallets well concealed and out of the reach of pickpockets, and women should keep handbags in plain sight (on laps). If you win a big jackpot, ask the pit boss or slot attendant to cut you a check rather than give you cash—the cash may look nice, but flashing it can attract the wrong kind of attention. Outside casinos, popular spots for pickpockets and thieves are restaurants and outdoor shows, such as the volcano at The Mirage or the fountains at Bellagio. Stay alert. Unless your hotel room has an in-room safe, check your valuables in a safe-deposit box at the front desk.

Smoking Increasingly strict smoking laws prohibit puffing virtually everywhere indoors except in designated hotel rooms, bars that don't serve food, and on the casino floor itself. Because it's frequently hard to tell where a casino ends and a basic public area begins, don't fret too much about stepping across some invisible line. But Vegas is decidedly no longer a smoker's haven.

Taxes Sales tax is 7%. The Clark County hotel room tax is 9%, and in Henderson it's 10%.

Time Zone Las Vegas is in the Pacific Time Zone, 3 hours earlier than the East Coast, 2 hours earlier than the Midwest.

Toilets The one thing Vegas does absolutely right is bathrooms. Each hotel-casino has numerous public restrooms, usually sparking clean, frequently large and often quite fancy or stylish. They are usually well marked with signs, but any casino worker can point you toward the closest one.

Weddings Las Vegas is one of the easiest places in the world to tie the knot. There's no blood test or waiting period, the

ceremony and license are inexpensive, chapels are open round-the-clock, and your honeymoon destination is right at hand. More than 101,000 marriages are performed here each year. Get a license Downtown at the **Clark County Marriage License Bureau,** 200 S. 3rd St., at Bridger Avenue (✆ **702/455-4415**), which is open daily from 8am to midnight. The cost of a marriage license is $55 (cash only); the cost of the ceremony varies depending on where you go to have it done. See "Getting Married," in chapter 5 for details on the local wedding chapels.

3

Where to Stay

If there's one thing Vegas has, it's hotels. Big hotels. And lots of them. You'll find 9 of the 10 largest hotels in the United States—8 of the top 10 in the world—right here. And you'll find a whole lot of rooms: 140,000 rooms, to be exact—or at least exact as of this writing. Every 5 minutes, or so it seems, someone is putting up a new giant hotel, or adding another 1,000 rooms to an existing one. So finding a place to stay in Vegas should be the least of your worries.

Or should it?

When a convention, a fight, or some other big event is happening—and these things are always happening—darn near all of those 140,000 rooms are going to be sold out. (Over the course of a regular year, the occupancy rate for hotel rooms in Las Vegas runs at about 90%.) A last-minute Vegas vacation can turn into a housing nightmare. If possible, plan in advance so that you can have your choice: Ancient Egypt or Ancient Rome? New York or New Orleans? Strip or Downtown? Luxury or economy? Vegas has all that and way too much more.

The bottom line is that with a few, mostly subtle differences, a hotel room is a hotel room is a hotel room. After you factor in location, price, and whether you have a pirate-loving kid, there isn't that much difference between rooms, except for perhaps size and the quality of their surprisingly similar furnishings.

Hotel prices in Vegas are anything but fixed, so you will notice wild price ranges. The same room can routinely go for anywhere from $60 to $250, depending on demand, and even that range is negotiable if it's a slow time (though such times are less and less common thanks to the influx of conventions). So use our price categories with a grain of salt, and don't rule out a hotel just because it's listed as "Very Expensive"—on any given day, you might get a great deal on a room in a pricey hotel. Just ask.

Reservations Services

The **Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority** runs a room-reservations hot line (✆ **877/VISIT-LV** or 702/892-0711; www.visitlasvegas.com) that can be helpful. They can apprise you of room availability, quote rates, contact a hotel for you, and tell you when major conventions will be in town. You can also try all of the major Internet travel sites, including Travelocity, Expedia, Orbitz, and Hotels.com. **Travelaxe (www.travelaxe.com)** is especially helpful when booking Vegas hotel rooms.

A couple words of warning: Make sure you don't get booked into a hotel you've never heard of. Try to stick with the hotels listed in this book. Always get your information in writing and then make some phone calls just to confirm that you really have the reservations that they say they've made for you.

1 South Strip

VERY EXPENSIVE

Four Seasons Hotel Las Vegas ★★★ *Kids* Various mammoth Vegas hotels attempt to position themselves as luxury resorts, insisting that service and fine cotton sheets can be done on a mass scale. But there is only one true luxury resort—in some people's eyes, *the* luxury resort—in town, located on the top five floors of Mandalay Bay, though in many ways the Four Seasons is light-years away. A separate driveway and portico entrance, plus an entire registration area, set you up immediately. This is the one fancy hotel in town where you are not greeted, even at a distance, with the general hubbub that is the soundtrack to Vegas.

Inside the hotel, all is calm and quiet. But it's really the best of both worlds—all you have to do is walk through a door and instantly you are in Mandalay Bay, with access to a casino, nightlife, and yes, general hubbub. The difference is quite shocking, and frankly, once you've experienced Vegas this way, it's kind of hard to go back to the constant sensory overload.

The rooms don't look like much at first—slightly bland but in good taste—but when you sink down into the furniture, you appreciate the fine quality. Here at last is a Vegas hotel where they really don't care if you ever leave your room, so the beds have feather pillows and down comforters, robes are plush, and amenities (such as safes, irons, voice mail, hair dryers, and VCRs) are really, really nice. Because Four Seasons has the southernmost location on the Strip, its Strip-view rooms (the most expensive units) give you the whole incredible panorama.

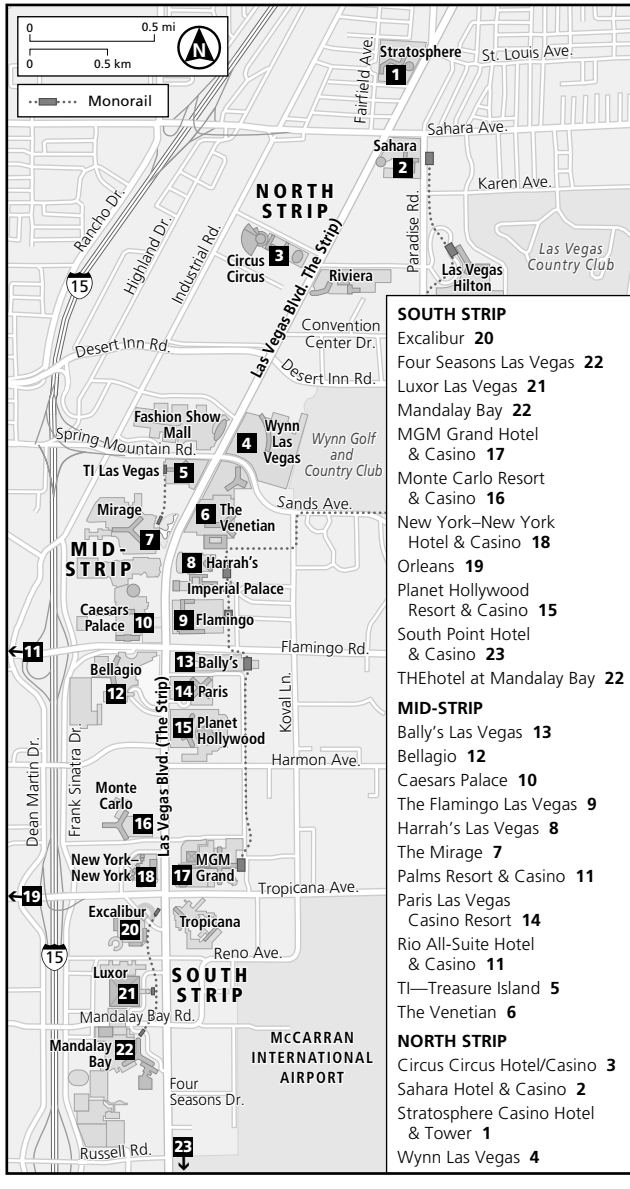
Service is superb and your needs are anticipated so quickly, you'll be tempted to sink to the floor in the lobby because you know someone will have a chair under your rear before you land. Children are encouraged (rare for Vegas) and spoiled with welcome gifts of toys and goodies, and rooms are childproofed in advance. Once you factor in all the freebies (gym/spa access, pool cabanas, various other amenities), not to mention the service and the blessed peace, the difference in price between Four Seasons and Bellagio (with all its hidden charges) is nothing.

3960 Las Vegas Blvd. S., Las Vegas, NV 89119. ✆ **877/632-5000** or 702/632-5000. Fax 702/632-5195. www.fourseasons.com. 424 units. $330 and up double; $555 and up suite. Extra person $30. Children 17 and under stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. Pets under 25 lb. accepted. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; heated outdoor pool; elegant health club (free to guests) and spa; concierge; car-rental desk; courtesy car; full 24-hr. business center w/faxing, delivery, and secretarial service; free Wi-Fi in public areas; 24-hr. room service; in-room massage; babysitting; overnight laundry service; overnight dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV/VCR w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), minibar, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe.

EXPENSIVE

Mandalay Bay ★★ Mandalay Bay is one of our favorite hotels. Why? Well, we love that the lobby (impossibly high ceilings, calm, gleaming with marble, and housing a large aquarium) and the other public areas really do seem more like an actual resort hotel than just a Vegas version of one. You don't have to walk through the casino to get to any of these public areas or the guest room elevators, the pool area is spiffy, and the whole thing is marginally less confusing and certainly less overwhelming than some of the neighboring behemoths.

We wouldn't say it really evokes colonial Southeast Asia—oh, maybe around the edges, if you squint, thanks to the odd bit of foliage or Balinese carving—and this may well keep out the gawkers, who are looking for bigger visual thrills, but we find a place whose theme doesn't bop you over the head refreshing.



SOUTH STRIP

Excalibur **20**
Four Seasons Las Vegas **22**
Luxor Las Vegas **21**
Mandalay Bay **22**
MGM Grand Hotel & Casino **17**
Monte Carlo Resort & Casino **16**
New York–New York Hotel & Casino **18**
Orleans **19**
Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino **15**
South Point Hotel & Casino **23**
THEhotel at Mandalay Bay **22**

MID-STRIP

Bally's Las Vegas **13**
Bellagio **12**
Caesars Palace **10**
The Flamingo Las Vegas **9**
Harrah's Las Vegas **8**
The Mirage **7**
Palms Resort & Casino **11**
Paris Las Vegas Casino Resort **14**
Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino **11**
TI—Treasure Island **5**
The Venetian **6**

NORTH STRIP

Circus Circus Hotel/Casino **3**
Sahara Hotel & Casino **2**
Stratosphere Casino Hotel & Tower **1**
Wynn Las Vegas **4**

The rooms are perhaps the best on the Strip (king rooms are more attractive than doubles), spacious and subdued in decor. King-size beds have large carved headboard posts and firm mattresses. Sheets are slightly scratchy and pillows too firm for those with neck problems. The bathrooms are the crowning glory: downright large with impressive, slightly sunken tubs, glassed-in showers, double sinks, and separate water closets, plus fab amenities and lots of them. (Bathrobes are available on request.)

Service overall is pretty good, and those pool-area employees are the best in Vegas, though there were no security guards at the guest elevators. A monorail system connects the hotel with Luxor and Excalibur, by which time you are well into Strip action, and this should more than help you get over any feelings of isolation.

The restaurants in Mandalay Bay feature some of the most innovative interiors in Vegas, each one more whimsical and imaginative than the next. **Aureole,** the **Border Grill, Red Square, rumjungle, House of Blues,** and the **buffet** are all notable places to dine. Mandalay Bay has a showroom featuring ***Mamma Mia!,*** the Broadway musical of ABBA songs, and a separate arena, which was inaugurated by none other than Luciano Pavarotti.

There are no fewer than four pools (one of them topless), including the touted wave pool, which is more of a mini-wave pool. So plan instead to bob gently, or better yet, float happily in the lazy river (boogie and surf board rentals are available).

The health club is sufficiently stocked to give you a good workout (it should be, because they charge guests $27 per day to use it). The spa area proper—featuring hot and warm pools, plus a cold plunge—is exotically designed, as close to those found in the Turkish spas in Eastern Europe as we've come across.

3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (at Hacienda Ave.), Las Vegas, NV 89119. ✆ **877/632-7000** or 702/632-7000. Fax 702/632-7228. www.mandalaybay.com. 3,309 units (excluding THEhotel). $99 and up double; $149 and up suite; $149 and up House of Blues Signature Rooms. Extra person $35. Children 14 and under stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; 12,000-seat events center; 1,700-seat performing-arts theater; aquarium; wedding chapels; 22 restaurants; 4 outdoor pools w/lazy river and wave pool; health club and spa; Jacuzzi; sauna; watersports equipment/rentals; concierge; tour desk; business center; 24-hr. room service; in-room massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe.

MGM Grand Hotel & Casino ★★ Vegas goes back and forth on its position on whether size does matter, and the MGM Grand is a perfect example of that. When it first opened, the massive glaring

green behemoth was the largest hotel in town, with a casino to match—and its owners boasted of its family-appropriateness, as typified by the theme park that was originally in the back. But times and emphasis change, and with everyone else in Vegas moving away from the pseudo-family-friendly direction to the whole luxury-resort persona, the MGM Grand had no choice but to follow. So if you book here thinking your kids are still welcome, you should think again. The amusement park in the back is gone, and so is the Wizard of Oz theme that originally gave the hotel its identity. Instead, there are striptease shows and a lounge called Tabú. That sort of thing certainly sends a message.

Consider also the place's size. The hotel management now downplays the once-touted hugeness, trying to pretend that the really big casino is actually several medium-big casinos. Whatever. Despite plenty of signage, it is still a lengthy, confusing schlep from anywhere to anywhere. The 80 or so 42-inch TV monitors (apprising registering guests of hotel happenings) in the otherwise lovely and vast white-marble lobby only add to the chaotic confusion a guest might feel—all the worse if you are toting kids.

Having said all of that, we've grown very fond of this hotel. Although the original standard rooms in the main tower with their 1930s-era Hollywood glam styling have been replaced by somewhat more blandly upscale decor, there's nothing wrong, really, with blandly upscale. They are generously proportioned and equipped with pretty much everything you might need, and while they may not be as large or as opulent as some of the super-luxe hotels in town, they are also not as expensive (usually). A second section of the tower, known as the West Wing, has a kicky contemporary style. These rooms are smaller (a rather tiny 350 sq. ft.) but full of the trendy touches we are complete suckers for: DVD and CD players, TVs in the bathroom mirrors, and fluffy bedding. There is no counter space in the open shower-only bathroom plan, but frosted green glass doors preserve privacy. Rooms include DVD and CD players, TVs in the bathroom mirrors, and fluffy bedding on the king-size beds. Overall, guests report that the staff couldn't be more friendly and helpful.

MGM houses a prestigious assemblage of dining rooms, among them **Joël Robuchon's** two new sterling entries, **Shibuya, Wolfgang Puck Bar & Grill,** and **Emeril's New Orleans Fish House.** There's also a **Rainforest Café.**

As befits a behemoth of this size, there's an appropriately gigantic casino. The show is ***KÀ,*** a dazzling offering from Cirque du Soleil.

Plus, there's **MGM Grand's *Crazy Horse Paris,*** a very adult topless show; a hot lounge, **Tabú;** nightclub **Studio 54;** a headliner showroom; and a larger events arena that hosts sporting events and bigger concerts. See chapter 8 for details on all the nightlife options.

The **Lion Habitat** is reviewed on p. 107.

The MGM Grand's **spa** ✪✪ is a Zen-Asian minimalist wonder, all natural stone and aged wood. The health club is state-of-the-art and larger than most, with some serious machines, including ones equipped with fancy computer video monitors (it'll cost you $25 to work up a sweat here most of the day, but you can use the gym facilities only, without the whirlpools and other amenities of the spa, for only $15 after 6pm).

The swimming pool area is a rousing success. The 6½ acres of landscaped grounds feature five pools, including the longest lazy river in town.

3799 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (at Tropicana Ave.), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **800/929-1111** or 702/891-7777. Fax 702/891-1030. www.mgmgrand.com. 5,034 units. $99 and up standard double; $159 and up suite. Extra person $30. Children under 13 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; events arena; showroom; Lion Habitat, cabaret theater; 2 wedding chapels; 15 restaurants; nightclub; 5 outdoor pools w/lazy river; large health club and spa; Jacuzzi; video-game arcade; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; business center; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; in-room massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe.

Monte Carlo Resort & Casino ✪ When it was built, the massive Monte Carlo was the world's seventh-largest hotel. It's now considerably overshadowed by its high-profile, more theme-intensive brethren. Entering it is still nice, as it comes off more as a European casino hotel alternative, replete with Corinthian colonnades, triumphal arches, and big and busy statuary, with an entryway opening onto a bustling casino. A separate entrance in the rear of the hotel leads to a splendid marble-floored, crystal-chandeliered lobby evocative of a European grand hotel. We love that the guest rooms are accessible without going through the casino, but we don't really love the rooms themselves, which are unimaginatively decorated and smaller than what we've grown accustomed to, especially in terms of bathroom square-footage. The pool area, once the very last word in local pool fun, is now put to shame by better versions over at Mandalay Bay and the MGM Grand. It does have a number of child-/family-/budget-friendly restaurants.

The Monte Carlo's **Pub & Brewery** and **Dragon Noodle Co.** are described in chapter 4. In addition, there is a highly recommended

branch of the classic Downtown French restaurant **Andre's** (p. 87). There's a large and overly ornate casino, plus a lavish showroom that currently hosts the recommended show by magician **Lance Burton** (p. 156).

Monte Carlo's health club and spa is nothing special, but then again, it's $22 for 1 day's access, which is cheaper than the fee at most other hotels.

3770 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (between Flamingo Rd. and Tropicana Ave.), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **800/311-8999** or 702/730-7777. Fax 702/730-7250. www.montecarlo.com. 3,002 units. $99 and up double; $149 and up suite. Extra person $25. No discount for children. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showroom; wedding chapel; 7 restaurants plus a food court; outdoor pool w/wave pool and lazy river; health club and spa; Jacuzzi; watersports equipment/rentals; video-game arcade; concierge; tour desk; business center; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; in-room massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board.

New York–New York Hotel & Casino ★★ *Kids* Isn't this exactly the kind of hotel you think about—or dream about or fear—when you think "Las Vegas"? There it is, a jumbled pile mock-up of the venerable Manhattan skyline, the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, the Public Library, all crammed together, along with the 150-foot Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, all built to approximately one-third scale. And as if that weren't enough, they threw in a roller coaster running around the outside and into the hotel and casino itself.

And inside, there are details everywhere—so many, in fact, that the typical expression on the face of casino-goers is slack-jawed wonder. If you enter the casino via the Brooklyn Bridge (the walkway from the Strip), you find yourself in a replica of Greenwich Village, down to the cobblestones, the manhole covers, the tenement buildings, and the graffiti. (Yes, they even re-created that. You should see the subway station.) The reception area and lobby are done in an Art Deco, golden-age-of-Manhattan style; you feel like breaking out into a 1930s musical number while standing there. It's a *wow!* all right.

Rooms are housed in different towers, each with a New York–inspired name. Truthfully, the place is so massive and mazelike that finding your way to your room can take a while. There are 64 different layouts of newly redecorated rooms, with the original Deco-inspired decor having made way for something they call '40s inspired. We don't see it, but we do find it a sophisticated modern color scheme of earth tones and pale pastels, with dark, rich wood

furniture and even padded headboards. Overall, sufficiently urbane, for a mass-market room. The lamps and armoires reflect the skyscraper theme, TVs are large, the lighting is bad, the work desk is fine, and pillows and mattresses are surprisingly comfortable for this level of hotel room, while the bathrooms are small, though done in a pleasing gray marble. Upgrades did not include better towels or water pressure. There can be a looooonnnggg walk from the elevators, so if you have ambulatory issues, you had best mention this while booking. (Rooms in the single digits seem to be in the Empire Tower, if that helps give you a clue to location.) Light sleepers should request a room away from the roller coaster. There's a small health club and spa, and the mediocre pool is right next to the parking lot.

In addition to a number of more-than-decent restaurants, including reliable Italian chain **Il Fornaio,** there are several festive and beautifully decorated bars throughout the property. **Coyote Ugly** is a party-hearty bar where dancing on furniture is encouraged; and in the **Bar at Times Square,** a lighted ball drops every night at midnight to re-create the famous New Year's Eve event in the real location. *Zumanity* is a topless and adults-only production that we think is overrated.

3790 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (at Tropicana Ave.), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **800/693-6763** or 702/740-6969. Fax 702/740-6920. www.nynyhotelcasino.com. 2,023 units. $79 and up double. Extra person $30. No discount for children. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showrooms; 9 restaurants plus a food court; outdoor pool; small health club and spa; Jacuzzi; video-game arcade w/carnival midway games; concierge; tour desk; business center; salon; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe.

Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino ✪ We were sad when the once fairy-tale fantastic Aladdin was purchased by Planet Hollywood—it was the end of yet another era. Sure, today's Aladdin wasn't the same building where Elvis married 'Scilla, but even so. Also, Planet Hollywood brings with it attention-deficit pizzazz rather than thematic silliness. But that's the direction in which Vegas is moving.

The reconstructed entrance, heavy on the LED screens, certainly makes the interior easier to access than the last incarnation of Aladdin. Inside, those looking for the pop kitsch sensibility of the Planet Hollywood restaurants will be disappointed; it's actually kind of classy and design intensive. What it really offers that's different is the rooms. Each has a movie or entertainment theme, such as *Pulp*

Fiction, which might have John Travolta's suit in a glass case and a glass coffee table filled with more original memorabilia from the film. Although more than one room may share the same movie theme, no two rooms will have the same objects. As gimmicks go, it's a catchy one, and a good use for all that junk the company's accumulated over the years. Beds have purple velour padded headboards and the beds themselves are the Sheraton Four Comforts pillow-top thing. Bathrooms are larger than standard but neither the largest on the Strip nor special enough to match the sleeping areas.

Restaurants include the already massively popular 24-hour coffee shop Planet Daily, a Trader Vic's (just in time for the original to close forever), P.F. Chang's, Striphouse, and the Earl of Sandwich, from the very same noble family that lent its name to the food.

The **Miracle Mile** shopping area rivals the capitalist ventures over at Caesars and The Venetian. The hotel also has its own arena. And there is the Medina-flavored **Mandera spa** ✪✪✪, maybe aesthetically our hands-down local favorite. All in all, the place teeters on the brink of a higher rating but it's still a little early to say for sure.

3667 Las Vegas Blvd. S., Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **877/333-9474** or 702/785-5555. Fax 702/785-5558. www.planethollywoodresort.com. 2,600 units. $99 and up double. Extra person $30. No discount for children. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; performing-arts center; showroom; chapel; 19 restaurants; 7 bars/lounges; 2 outdoor pools; health club and spa; 2 Jacuzzis; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; business center; extensive shopping arcade; 24-hr. room service; in-room massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe.

THEhotel at Mandalay Bay ✪✪✪ The rather silly nomenclature of this recent, utterly fabulous Vegas property reminds us of our previous consideration regarding the Four Seasons' relationship with Mandalay Bay (located on the top floors, but operated as a separate entity)—it's part *of* the hotel, but not precisely *the* hotel. In this case, this really is *THE*hotel, in all senses, not least of which is that even though we were quite fond of Mandalay Bay prior to the opening of this conjoined twin of a property, we now think of it, if we do at all, rather as the frowzy sister from the sticks who looks tawdry and rumpled next to its sleek *Vogue* magazine editor sibling. (Actually, we still like Mandalay Bay a great deal.)

This is not a casino hotel—though it is connected to one by a long hallway—but a world of sleek towering walls of lighting, ambiguous modern art, and both guests and employees in head-to-toe black. It wows you from the start in a way that coolly says, "You probably already live like this, don't you?" while handing you a

nicely chilled Cosmopolitan. Everything here is still out-of-proportion large, but it's sophisticated and chic, all blacks, tans, woods, and midcentury modern sharp lines. Every room is a genuine suite, done in more black, tans, and gleaming woods. There are plasma-screen TVs in every room, including the enormous marbled bathroom, where the tub is so deep the water will come up to your chin when you sit down. Bath amenities are posh, the comforters are down, and the sheets—just feel the soft heft. One complaint might be the excess of mirrors and the overall lack of good lighting. But seriously, you won't care. For once, a hotel room in Vegas designed to make you want to stay put. Not that you have to; as stated, all the amenities of Mandalay Bay (their incredible pool area, a number of terrific restaurants) are just down a long hall, though the instant you step from this grown-up world into the world of, well, noisy grown-up pursuits, which isn't the same thing at all, you might well want to turn right back around.

The staff, though, are hardly cuddly, and service reflects that. Costs at the sleek cafes are higher than even the usual elevated hotel restaurant prices. Then again, you can use just the workout facilities at the Bathhouse Spa, its rather unfortunately named but gorgeous health club and spa, for only $20 (cheap compared to other comparable hotels, though it's $30 if you also want to use the saunas and the like). This is the place we would splash out on (and certainly would leap on any specials offered), but with the understanding that it's still, despite appearances, a Vegas hotel, though very likely the best there is.

3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S., Las Vegas, NV 89119. ✆ **877/632-7800** or 702/632-7777. Fax 702/632-9215. www.thehotelatmandalaybay.com. 1,120 units. $189 and up suite. Extra person $35. Children under 14 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; access to Mandalay Bay restaurants/pool/casino; health club and spa; tour desk; car-rental desk; business center; 24-hr. room service; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, 3 flatscreen TVs, CD/DVD player, combo printer/fax, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), wet bar, hair dryer, iron/ironing board.

MODERATE

Excalibur ★ *Kids* Now *this* is kitsch. One of the largest resort hotels in the world, Excalibur (also known as the Realm) is a gleaming white, turreted castle complete with moat, drawbridge, battlements, and lofty towers. And it's huger than huge. You know, as much as we might publicly stand in favor of quiet good taste, there is a part of our soul that is secretly thrilled by overblown fantasy locations—it's so authentically Vegas. And yet, we just know that

any minute now, the Lords of Taste will bring an end to its sword-and-sorcery imagery. There are some ominous rumblings in keeping with the rest of Vegas's careening away from the "family-friendly" image—gone is the animatronic dragon and wizard show out front, and inside there is a male-stripper act, *Thunder from Down Under.* It's really too bad because, without the excess, this is just a mighty big and chaotic hotel, thanks to a sprawling casino full of families and small-time gamblers.

Rooms currently come in two flavors. The older ones, which are done in neutrals (a little too much brown for our tastes), have vague heraldic overtones and, given the price, are perhaps the best bet on the Strip for the budget-minded, if you don't mind a unit that is somewhat worn. Note that none of the bathrooms have tubs, just showers. Guests who have stayed in Tower 2 have complained about the noise from the roller coaster across the street at New York–New York. Option 2 is the redone rooms, which cost a touch more, but might be worth it. They only slightly reflect the Olde English theme and feature the brown suede headboards that are all the rage, flatscreen TVs, spiffed-up bathrooms with new marble fixtures, and nice wallpaper. Frankly, we prefer stopping in for a visit rather than actually settling here, but we know single-minded others (read: Vegas is for gambling, and so is the majority of the vacation budget) who wouldn't consider staying anywhere else.

The second floor holds the Medieval Village, where Excalibur's restaurants and shops are peppered along winding streets and alleyways, a sort of permanent Renaissance Faire, which could be reason enough to stay away (or to come). Up here you can access the enclosed, air-conditioned, moving sidewalk that connects with the Luxor. The pool area is getting a face-lift to add in better landscaping, fancy cabanas, and the like. There are plenty of restaurants, including **The Roundtable Buffet**, a pretty good prime rib joint, and a branch of Krispy Kreme Doughnuts. The ***Tournament of Kings*** is a medieval-style dinner show, and there's a very loud, claustrophobic casino.

3850 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (at Tropicana Ave.), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **800/937-7777** or 702/597-7700. Fax 702/597-7163. www.excalibur.com. 4,008 units. $49 and up double. Extra person $20. Children under 13 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showrooms; wedding chapel; 5 restaurants plus a food court; outdoor pool; video-game arcade; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; shopping arcade; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board.

Luxor Las Vegas ★★ *Kids* Another hotel that thrills us to our very kitsch-worshipping souls. How happy you, who share our aesthetic taste—or lack thereof—will be when you behold the main hotel, a 30-story onyx-hued pyramid, complete with a really tall 315,000-watt light beam at the top. You'll be giddy when you spy the towering statues of Ramses and overhear the talking animatronic camels as you enter, though the Art Deco lobby is somewhat classy as well. It's not as impressive as the real landmarks in the real Egypt, of course. But you knew that. Of course, there are stirrings among the no-fun casino execs here to de-theme this hotel (a sad refrain), but we hope this plan does not come to fruition (and how do you de-theme a giant pyramid anyway?).

Rooms in the pyramid open onto the vast center that contains the casino, so if you want only a short drunken stumble back to your room, these are for you. Otherwise, ask for a room higher up. The pyramid rooms cross Egyptian kitsch with Art Deco stylings, and marvelous views are offered through the slanted windows (the higher up the better, of course), but the bathrooms are shower-only, no tubs. High-speed "inclinator" elevators run on a 39-degree angle, making the ride up to your room a bit of a thrill—check out that sensation as the mechanisms grind to a halt!

Tower rooms (an expansion put additional rooms in a tower rather than another pyramid. Drat!) are even heavier on the Egyptian motif (with huge armoires housing the TVs and closet space), pleasing in a campy way but not as aesthetically successful. The bathrooms, however, including deep tubs, are better, so it might be a worthwhile trade-off. Regardless of which room you get, these are some of the few rooms in Las Vegas that stand out. You know you are in the Luxor when you find yourself surrounded by unique, charming room design, as opposed to the cookie-cutter room decor usually found elsewhere in town.

MORE, The Buffet at Luxor offers a cool archaeological-dig atmosphere. They are in the process of installing new nightclubs, which should be state-of-the-art. Two notable attractions here are the **King Tut's Tomb & Museum** (p. 104) and the Luxor **IMAX Theatre & Ridefilm** (p. 103).

3900 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (between Reno and Hacienda aves.), Las Vegas, NV 81119. ✆ **888/777-0188** or 702/262-4000. Fax 702/262-4478. www.luxor.com. 4,400 units. $59 and up double; $149 and up whirlpool suite; $249–$800 other suites. Extra person $25. Children under 12 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showrooms; 7 restaurants plus a food court; nightclub; 5 outdoor pools; health club and spa; 18,000-sq.-ft. video-game arcade; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; business center; shopping

arcade; 24-hr. room service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board.

South Point ★★ *Value* Including the South Point in the South Strip category stretches the definition almost to the breaking point. Located about 6 miles south of Mandalay Bay, it is still on Las Vegas Boulevard but certainly not within walking distance of anything else of interest except for maybe a convenience store. Still, this hotel is a worthwhile addition, offering an "expensive" level of accommodations at a "moderate" price.

Done by the same folks who brought us successful locals' hotels such as Orleans and Suncoast, the South Point follows the same formula established by its ancestors: nice rooms at reasonable costs; plenty of low-priced food outlets; tons of entertainment options, including movie theaters, a bowling alley, and more; and a massive casino with lower-than-average limits on everything from slots to craps tables. There's also a giant Equestrian Center out back, large enough for just about any rodeo, complete with air-conditioned horse stalls and a pen for thousands of head of cattle. A unique offering to be sure, but we'd recommend that you choose a nonevent time to stay here, if possible, because no matter how many odor-absorbing wood chips you throw at them, 2,000 head of cattle emit a less-than-pleasant odor that may make an afternoon by the pool rather unenjoyable.

The overall scheme is Southern California modern, with plenty of sunny paint schemes and airy architectural details. Think Santa Barbara instead of Hollywood, and you're probably in the ballpark. Rooms are large and aesthetically pleasing, each over 500 square feet and crammed full with expensive and luxurious furnishings, 42-inch plasma televisions, and all the other pampering amenities one would expect in a room three times the price. Seriously, a weekend rate check had rooms here at $125 per night, while Bellagio and Wynn were well over $400. Although we wouldn't put these rooms on quite the same level as the ones at those two ultraluxe establishments, we have a hard time coming up with $275 worth of difference.

9777 Las Vegas Blvd. S., Las Vegas, NV 89183. ✆ **866/796-7111** or 702/796-7111. Fax 702/365-7505. www.southpointcasino.com. 1,350 units. $59 and up double. Extra person $15. Children under 15 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. Free shuttle service to Mandalay Bay. **Amenities:** Casino; 16-screen movie theater; 64-lane bowling center; 4,400-seat equestrian and events center; 6 restaurants; outdoor pool; spa; concierge; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, Wi-Fi (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board.

INEXPENSIVE

Orleans ★ *Value* *Kids* The Orleans is a little out-of-the-way, and there is virtually nothing around it, but with an 18-screen movie complex, complete with a food court and day-care center, a bowling alley (that keeps ridiculously late hours; we know more than one recent guest who found a 3am game just the right way to wind down after a hectic clubbing night), and a 9,000-seat arena for a minor-league hockey team (but also available for concerts and the like), this is a reasonable alternative to staying on the hectic Strip. Plus, there is a shuttle that runs continuously to the Gold Coast, Sam's Town, and Suncoast. The facade is aggressively fake New Orleans, more reminiscent of Disneyland than the actual Big Easy. Inside, it's much the same.

If the prices hold true (as always, they can vary), this hotel is one of the best bargains in town, despite the location, though the staff can be rotten, which can seriously sour a bargain experience. (On the other hand, room service seems fine.) The rooms are nice enough and have a definite New Orleans–French feel. Each is L-shaped, with a seating alcove by the windows, and comes complete with an old-fashioned, overstuffed chair and sofa. The beds have brass headboards, the lamps (including some funky iron floor lamps) look antique, and lace curtains flutter at the windows. The one drawback is that all these furnishings, and the busy floral decorating theme, make the rooms seem crowded. Still, it's meant to evoke a cozy, warm Victorian parlor, which traditionally is very overcrowded, so maybe it's successful after all. The hotel has your basic Vegas-type places to eat. Worth noting are Big Al's Oyster Bar, a not-unauthentic Creole/Cajun-themed restaurant; and Don Miguel's, a basic but satisfying Mexican restaurant that makes its own tortillas while you watch. There are several bars, including one with live music at night.

4500 W. Tropicana Ave. (west of the Strip and I-15), Las Vegas, NV 89103. ✆ **800/ORLEANS** (675-3267) or 702/365-7111. Fax 702/365-7505. www.orleanscasino.com. 1,886 units. $59 and up double; $175 and up suites. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showroom; 9,000-seat arena; 18-screen movie theater; 70-lane bowling center; 12 restaurants; 2 outdoor pools; health club and spa; Kids Tyme children's center offering amusements and day care for kids 3–12; video-game arcade; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board.

2 Mid-Strip

VERY EXPENSIVE

Bellagio ✯✯ This is the luxury resort that ushered in the new post-Vegas-is-for-families elegance epoch. It's not as theme-intensive as it could be, it still has some elements drawn from its charming Lake Como village namesake, and we do prefer even our resorts to have some of that Vegas silliness, however faint. In this case, it's an 8-acre Lake Como stand-in out front, complete with a dazzling choreographed water-ballet extravaganza, plus a representation of an Italian lakeside village, while the pool area is sort of Hearst Castle Romanesque. However, don't think this is much like a getaway to a peaceful, romantic Italian village because it's not. But it is exactly like going to a big, grand, state-of-the-art Vegas hotel. Nothing with a casino stuck in the middle of it can be that serene and restful.

But does it work as a luxury hotel? Sort of. It certainly is much closer to a European casino hotel than a Vegas one. Fabulous touches abound, including a lobby that's unlike any other in Vegas. It's not just grand, with marble and a gaudy blown-glass flower sculpture on the ceiling (the largest of its kind in the world), but it's also brave with plants, natural lighting, and actual seating. There's also a downright lovely conservatory, complete with a 100-year-old fountain and stuffed full of gorgeous, brightly colored flowers and plants, preposterously (and delightfully) changed every few weeks to go with the season (yellows and whites for Easter, for example)—it's one of the sweetest spots in all of Vegas.

On the downside, you still can't avoid a walk through the casino to get just about anywhere, and there are hidden charges galore. The rooms are quite nice, but given their relatively puny size, may still not be enough for the price. Furnishings are plush (good beds with quality linens, comfy chairs), the roomy bathrooms even more so (marble and glass plus good-smelling soap), but it's all just a busier and slightly more luxurious variation on what's found over at TI–Treasure Island. Strip-side rooms, while featuring a much-desired view of the water fountains, don't quite muffle the booms that said fountains make as they explode. Still, service is top-notch, despite the size of the place; the staff is eager to please and nonpatronizing.

Meanwhile, just about all the best new restaurants are found in Bellagio, including **Picasso, Le Cirque, Circo, Michael Mina, Fix, Sensi, Jean-Philippe Patisserie,** and **Olives.** Some of these are reviewed in chapter 4.

The resort's **water ballet** ★★★, courtesy of a dancing fountain with jets timed to a rotating list of nine songs (everything from pop to Sinatra to Broadway to opera), sounds cheesy, but it absolutely is not. It's really quite delightful and even witty (no, really), and is the best free show in Vegas. Bellagio also features an upscale casino, and ***O*** (p. 154), perhaps the most incredible show from Cirque du Soleil.

The pool area has skidded to the top of our favorites list; it boasts six swimming pools (two heated year-round and two with fountains) geometrically set in a neoclassical Roman garden, with flowered, trellised archways and Italian opera piped in over the sound system. The spa and health club are marvelous, but at $25 a pop, it's pretty pricey (though with your fee, you are allowed to return throughout the day for additional soakings/steamings/workouts). The gym has the latest in cardio and weight machines, but can get very crowded. Attendants ply you with iced towels and drinks. The revamped **spa** ★★ offers a full range of pricey treatments and has a serene soaking area with sumptuous plunge pools. In addition to drinks and snacks, smoothies are often offered—take one.

The shopping area, called **Via Bellagio,** features all the stores that advertise in color in glossy magazines: Tiffany, Armani, Gucci, Prada, Hermès, and the like. And there's also a highly regarded **art gallery** (p. 100).

3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (at the corner of Flamingo Rd.), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **888/987-6667** or 702/693-7111. Fax 702/693-8546. www.bellagio.com. 3,933 units. $149 and up double. Extra person $35. No discount for children. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showrooms; wedding chapel; 14 restaurants; nightclub; 6 outdoor pools; large health club and spa; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; business center; elegant shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; in-room massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe.

Caesars Palace ★★ Since 1966, Caesars has stood simultaneously as the ultimate in Vegas luxury and the nadir (or pinnacle, depending on your values) of Las Vegas cheese. It's the most Vegas-style hotel you'll find, covering all the bases from the tacky fabulous cheese of the recent past to the current trend in high-end luxury. Never one to rest on any kind of laurels, Roman or otherwise, Caesars is always building and expanding. As a result, the hotel is getting a bit too big for its own britches: The layout has become ever more confusing and hard to negotiate, and it takes forever to get anywhere—especially out to the Strip.

Still, past or future, Caesars remains spectacular. From the Roman temples, heroic arches, golden charioteers, and 50-foot Italian cypresses at its entrance, to the impressive interiors, it's the spectacle a good Vegas hotel should be.

Accommodations occupy five towers, and there are too many decorating schemes to describe here. Augustus is the newest and somewhat biggest, while the Palace is the most recently upgraded. Standard rooms in the new tower are done in the sleek, unfussy neutrals that are all the rage, plus whirlpool tubs, marble and wood sinks, and little flatscreen TVs in the bathrooms. If you like elbowroom, it's worth it. If you are looking for old-time Caesars romance, ask for rooms with a Greco-Roman theme; furnishings tend to neoclassical styles; Roman columns, pilasters, and pediments are common. Some may still have four-poster beds with mirrored ceilings. Some newer rooms have floor-to-ceiling windows that offer a hypnotizing panoramic view and, better still, older ones have lavish tubs in the middle of the room (which can be uncomfortable if you wish to shower and don't want your shower to turn into a spectator sport).

Caesars has a well-deserved reputation for superior in-house restaurants. There are quite a few in the hotel, plus dining facilities in the Forum shopping area. All are highly recommended. The hotel's food court is one of the best in town (p. 76). Restaurants in the Forum Shops arcade include **Spago, The Palm,** and the **Stage Deli.** For nightlife, there's **Pure** and **Cleopatra's Barge Nightclub.**

Having spent over $100 million renovating its **Garden of the Gods,** Caesars has created a tasteful, undeniably "Caesar-esque" masterpiece. With three pools measuring a total of 22,000 square feet, there is plenty of space for frolicking in the hot sun. Inspired by the healing Baths of Caracalla in Rome, each of the pools is adorned with griffins or sea horses and inlaid with classic granite-and-marble mosaics. Several amenities are also available by the pool area, including massage, two whirlpools, three tennis courts, the Neptune Bar, and of course, a Snackus Maximus.

The new **Qua spa** is a knockout. Stone-and-water themed Roman baths with infinity pools, an ice room with shaved ice exfoliation, rain showers, and best of all, heated tile curved lounge chairs. Add in a tea lounge with drinks and you've got the perfect place for post-party detox. If you have the energy, the fitness room is large, with plush padded equipment and plenty of windows.

The **Forum Shops** ★★★ are in the grandest mall you can imagine. And, not content to stop paying contractors, Caesars also added the 4,000-seat Coliseum, a replica of the original building in Rome.

This was built for one purpose only—to give diva **Céline Dion** a place to play. No kidding. Céline is about to move on after some years of residency, but **Bette Midler** is about to take her place, appearing 100 nights a year. When she's not in town, her venue is taken over by various über-names, such as Elton John and his *The Red Piano* production.

3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (just north of Flamingo Rd.), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **877/427-7243** or 702/731-7110. Fax 702/697-5706. www.caesarspalace.com. 3,348 units. $129 and up double; $549 and up suite. Extra person $30. Children under 18 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; 4 wedding chapels; 25 restaurants; nightclub; 4 outdoor pools; health club and spa; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; business center; extensive shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe, robe/slippers.

Paris Las Vegas Casino Resort ★ *Sacre bleu!* The City of Light comes to Sin City in this fantasy hotel. It's theme-run-amok time again, and we are so happy about it. The outside reproduces various Parisian landmarks (the Hotel de Ville is crammed on top of the Louvre), complete with a half-scale perfect replica of the Eiffel Tower. The interior puts you in the middle of a dollhouse version of the city. You can stroll down a mini–Rue de la Paix, ride an elevator to the top of the Eiffel Tower, stop at an overpriced bakery for a baguette, and take your photo by several very nice fountains.

You'll find signage employing the kind of dubious use of the French language that makes genuine Frenchmen really cross ("le car rental" and so forth), while all the employees are forced to dust off their high school French ("Bonjour, Madame! Merci beaucoup!") when dealing with the public. Don't worry, it's all not quite enough to make you sick to "le stomach."

Quel dommage, this attention to detail does not extend to the rooms, which are nice enough but disappointingly uninteresting, with furniture that only hints at mock French Regency. Bathrooms are small but pretty, with deep tubs. Try to get a Strip-facing room so that you can see Bellagio's fountains across the street; note also that north-facing rooms give you nice Peeping Tom views right into neighboring Bally's. The monorail has a stop out back. Overall, not a bad place to stay but a great place to visit—*quel hoot!*

The hotel has eight more-or-less French-themed restaurants, including a highly lauded **Le Village Buffet,** the **Eiffel Tower restaurant** (located guess where), and bistro **Mon Ami Gabi.** The bread for all these restaurants is made fresh on-site at the bakery. You

can buy delicious, if pricey, loaves of it at the bakery, and we have to admit, that's kinda fun. There are also five lounges.

The **Eiffel Tower** attraction is covered on p. 101.

3655 Las Vegas Blvd. S., Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **888/BONJOUR** (266-5687) or 702/946-7000. www.parislv.com. 2,916 units. $119 and up double; $350 and up suites. Extra person $30. Children under 18 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC. V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showrooms; 2 wedding chapels; 12 restaurants; outdoor pool; health club and spa; concierge; tour desk; business center; shopping arcade; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe.

The Venetian ★★ One of the most elaborate hotel spectacles in town, The Venetian falls squarely between an outright adult Disneyland experience and the luxury resort experience that many of the other recently renovated Vegas hotels offer. Its exterior, which recreates most of the top landmarks of Venice (the Campanile, a portion of St. Mark's Square, part of the Doge's Palace, a canal or two), ranks right up there with New York–New York as a must-see, and because you can wander freely through the "sights," it even has a slight edge. We have to admit that the attention to detail here is impressive indeed. Stone is aged for that weathered look, statues and tiles are exact copies of their Italian counterparts, security guards wear Venetian police uniforms—all that's missing is the smell from the canals, but we are happy to let that one slide.

Inside, ceilings are covered with hand-painted re-creations of Venetian art. With plenty of marble, soaring ceilings, and impressive pillars and archways, it's less kitschy than Caesars but more theme park than Bellagio. The lobby, casino, and shops can all be accessed from outside through individual entrances, which helps avoid that irritating circuitous maneuvering required by most other locations. This is all the more appreciated because the casino seems to have a most confusing layout, with poor signage.

The rooms are the among the largest and probably the most handsome in town, with a flair that's more European than Vegas. They are all "suites," with a good-size bedroom giving way to a sunken living area, complete with pullout sofa bed. Rooms have somewhat stately furniture, including painted, scallop-topped armoires; thickly draped half canopies over the beds; and crown moldings on ceilings. The marbled bathrooms rocketed virtually to the top of our list of favorites, in a tie for second place with those at Bellagio. (Mandalay Bay's THEhotel are the best.) Glassed-in showers, deep soaking tubs, double sinks, fluffy towels, and lots of

space—that does it for us every time. Devices for the hearing-impaired are available upon request.

Despite the niceties, there is a certain amount of price gouging at this hotel that unpleasantly reminds one of the real Venice. There is a charge for that in-room faxing and printing, and the minibar is automated so that if you so much as rearrange items inside, you are charged for it.

And all this is even before the **Venezia Tower,** with over 1,000 more rooms, with the same large and lush footprint and style as the originals. The tower has its own check-in and gestalt—somehow, it comes off even more lush than the original hotel, which is pretty frilly to start. It's like a Four Seasons on human growth hormones, with over-the-top opulence. The gas lamp–lit lobby hallway slays us, as do the flatscreen TVs in the bathrooms. Rooms here cost about $35 more a night (in theory—in practice, anything goes with hotel pricing in Vegas) and we would spend it. The new trend toward casino hotels adding additions that are away from a casino—"Nope, no slot machines here. We are just a luxury hotel. Really!"—is a disingenuous stance that is actually entirely genius. There are many who prefer their Vegas at arm's length, and nothing says "comfortable room" like "plasma TV in the bathroom."

There are many celebrity chefs and high-profile restaurants in residence at The Venetian, including **Bouchon**, **Delmonico Steakhouse, Canaletto, Valentino,** and **Pinot Brasserie.** The Venetian has five pools and whirlpools, but its pool area is disappointing—sterile and bland. The lavish **Canyon Ranch SpaClub** ★★★ is run by a branch of arguably the finest getaway spa in America and is the finest hotel spa in town. The $30-a-day fee is high, but it does include a full day's worth of classes ranging from regular aerobics to yoga, Pilates, and dance. Did we mention the rock-climbing wall?

The **Grand Canal Shoppes** rank with Caesars' shops as an absolute must-see. Down the middle runs a canal, complete with singing gondoliers. (The 10-min. ride costs about $15, which seems steep, but trust us, it's a *lot* more in the real Venice.) The whole thing finishes up at a small re-creation of St. Mark's Square, which features glass blowers, traveling musicians, flower sellers, and the like. Expect to run into famous Venetians such as a flirty Casanova and a travel-weary Marco Polo. It's ambitious and a big step up from animatronic figures. Oh, and the stores are also probably worth a look—a decent mixture of high-end fashion and more affordable shops.

And let's not forget that this is the only hotel in town with a branch of the famed Guggenheim Museum, called the **Guggeheim/ Hermitage Museum** (p. 103).

3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S., Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **888/2-VENICE** (283-6423) or 702/414-1000. Fax 702/414-4805. www.venetian.com. 4,027 units. $169 and up double. Extra person $35. Children under 13 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showroom; wedding chapels; 18 restaurants; 6 outdoor pools; health club and spa; video-game arcade; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; business center; extensive shopping arcade; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, fax, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), fridge, hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe.

EXPENSIVE

The Flamingo Las Vegas ★ The Strip's senior citizen has changed a great deal since Bugsy Siegel opened his 105-room oasis "in the middle of nowhere" in 1946. It was so luxurious for its time that even the janitors wore tuxedos. (Hey, new Vegas? That's class.) Jimmy Durante was the opening headliner, and the wealthy and famous flocked to the tropical paradise of swaying palms, lagoons, and waterfalls. A relatively recent renovation and expansion isn't going to make Siegel's "real class joint" cause you to forget about, say, the rooms at the new Venetian tower, but it did freshen the joint up—including making it somewhat easier to reach the outside world, which in the past was often difficult. And the newish branch of singer Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville nightclub, a theme locale that makes us wince when it's in, say, New Orleans, doesn't look so bad in Vegas. Not bad!

By Vegas standards, the old girl is Paleozoic, but not only is it hanging in there, but some of the changes have made us reconsider it entirely. Gradually, all their dated rooms are getting upgraded. The first set off the conveyor belt are flatly terrific. Rushing headlong into the Dean Martin/Rat Pack retro vibe, they are kicky candy modern, with hot pink (the signature Flamingo color!) accent walls, hot pink lights in the bathroom where you can also find TV screens embedded in the mirror, candy-striped wallpaper, black-and-white photos of The Flamingo from its early days, squishy white beds with chocolate accents and vinyl padded headboards, huge flatscreens with HDTV, iPod docking stations, and more. Two-bedroom suites scream classic playboy bachelor pad. It's ring-a-ding fun and Dino would surely have approved, well worth the extra $50 currently charged for the upgraded rooms. It's uncertain whether further room renovations will follow this design, but thus far, the hotel has inspired confidence.

There are also several bars, plus a huge casino and the improv production show ***The Second City*** (p. 159). And the monorail has a stop out back.

Five gorgeous swimming pools, two whirlpools, water slides, and a kiddie pool are located in a 15-acre Caribbean landscape amid lagoons, meandering streams, fountains, waterfalls, a rose garden, and islands of live flamingos and African penguins. Ponds have ducks, swans, and koi, and a grove of 2,000 palms graces an expanse of lawn.

A health club ($20 fee per day) offers a variety of weight machines, treadmills, stair machines, free weights, sauna, steam, a TV lounge, and hot and cold whirlpools. Spa services include massage, facials, salt glow, and body wraps.

3555 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (between Sands Ave. and Flamingo Rd.), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **800/732-2111** or 702/733-3111. Fax 702/733-3353. www.flamingolv.com. 3,517 units. $75 and up double; $350 and up suite. Extra person $30. Children under 12 stay free in parent's room. Timeshare suites available. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showrooms; wedding chapels; 8 restaurants; 5 outdoor pools; 3 night-lit tennis courts; health club and spa; small video-game arcade; car-rental desk; UPS Store; shopping arcade; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe.

Harrah's Las Vegas ✪ Here's another property that is doing its best to keep up with the pace in Vegas, to mixed success. Though parts of Harrah's benefited from a reworking of the place a few years ago, the rest of it evokes Old Las Vegas—dark, dated, and claustrophobic. Still, there is much to like here, and occasional good rates might make the so-so bits worth overlooking. Certainly, they want to be the fun and convivial place we wish more of Vegas was. The monorail stop is a draw, too, because it is now easier to get to and from here.

The rooms have undergone some cosmetic fluffing to the tune of good new mattresses and those white bed covers now more or less standard in most local hotels. Dark masculine decor is an odd choice for such a festive place. The rooms aren't flashy, but they are reliable for what is ultimately a gamblers' hotel.

The Range steakhouse is one of the few hotel restaurants that overlooks the Strip. Other restaurant options include a Toby Keith–themed joint featuring down-home cooking and nightly entertainment, a buffet, and a food court for quick bites to eat. The casino has a fun, festive atmosphere. There's a showroom (that used to be home to Sammy Davis, Jr., back in the day), a comedy club,

Mac King's wonderful comedy/magic act (p. 157), and other amusing entertainment diversions.

Carnaval Court (p. 142) is a festive, palm-fringed shopping plaza where strolling entertainers perform. It's notable because it's right on the Strip, but entirely outdoors. Note that lounge singer legend Cook E. Jarr plays here late on Friday and Saturday nights.

Harrah's has an Olympic-size swimming pool and sun-deck area with waterfall and trellised garden areas, and a whirlpool. It's a pretty underwhelming pool by Vegas standards.

The hotel's health club is one of the better facilities on the Strip, with a full-range spa and a gym with Lifecycles, treadmills, stair machines, rowing machines, lots of Universal equipment, free weights, and TVs and a VCR for which aerobic exercise tapes are available. Its $20-a-day access charge is more reasonable than the fees in other hotels.

3475 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (between Flamingo and Spring Mountain roads), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **800/HARRAHS** (427-7247) or 702/369-5000. Fax 702/369-5283. www.harrahs.com. 2,526 units. $99 and up double; $199 and up suite. Extra person $20. No discount for children. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showrooms; 9 restaurants; outdoor pool; health club and spa; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; business center; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, hair dryer, iron/ironing board.

The Mirage ★★ Once the hottest thing on the Strip, this former front-runner found itself years behind the ever-evolving Vegas hotel curve. So The Mirage dumped nearly all of its tropical theme in favor of the sleek, sophisticated, dark-wood look that is currently all the rage. It was a good choice. The place is looking sharp, stylish, and grown-up, instead of tired. Even though it has become somewhat eclipsed by the very hotels whose presence it made possible, we still really like this place.

Occupying 102 acres, The Mirage is fronted by more than a city block of cascading waterfalls and tropical foliage centering on a "volcano," which, after dark, erupts every 15 minutes, spewing fire 100 feet above the lagoons below. To be honest, it's not very volcanolike; instead of lava flow, expect a really neat light show, and you won't mind a bit. The lobby is dominated by a 53-foot, 20,000-gallon simulated coral-reef aquarium stocked with more than 1,000 colorful tropical fish. This gives you something to look at while waiting (never for long) for check-in.

Next, you'll walk through the rainforest, which occupies a 90-foot domed atrium—a path meanders through palms, banana trees,

waterfalls, and serene pools. If we must find a complaint with The Mirage, it's about the 8 miles (or so it seems) of casino mayhem that you must negotiate to get to your room, the pool, food, or the outside world. It gets old, fast.

Redone rooms are only slightly tropical, with florals confined to bedspreads and rugs. Some have nice sage wallpaper. The overall effect is more beach than Caribbean. The standard rooms, which are of a decent size, have tub/shower combos; tower rooms have Jacuzzi tubs, separate showers, two sinks, and slightly more comfy beds, so it might be worth springing a few extra bucks if such amenities matter to you. The **Mirage Cravings Buffet** is detailed on p. 93. The highly prominent production show by **Danny Gans** and the Cirque production *LOVE* are reviewed in chapter 8. The Mirage has one of our favorite casinos and some excellent nightclubs and bars. The Zen Japonais Lounge is appealing, with its fluttering spalike curtains and proximity to the rainforest. It's an odd bit of serenity right off the casino bustle.

Out back is the pool, one of the nicest in Vegas, with a quarter-mile shoreline, a tropical paradise of waterfalls and trees, water slides, and so forth. It looks inviting, but truth be told, it's sometimes on the chilly side and isn't very deep. But it's so pretty you'll hardly care. Free swimming lessons and water-aerobics classes take place daily at the pool. Behind the pool are the **Dolphin Habitat** and Siegfried and Roy's **Secret Garden** (p. 107). The **Mirage Day Spa** ✪ teems with friendly staff anxious to pamper you, bringing you iced towels to cool you during your workout and refreshing juices and smoothies afterward. The gym is one of the largest and best stocked on the Strip.

3400 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (between Flamingo Rd. and Spring Mountain Rd.), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **800/627-6667** or 702/791-7111. Fax 702/791-7446. www.mirage.com. 3,044 units. $119 and up double; $249 and up suite. Extra person $30. No discount for children. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showrooms; 11 restaurants; beautiful outdoor pool; health club and spa; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; business center; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe.

Palms Resort & Casino ✪ One of the hottest of the newer hotels, given quite the PR boost when it was Britney's base for her first wedding debacle. In keeping with the tropical-foliage name, it's more or less Miami-themed (but without the pastels), with a strange aversion toward straight lines (really, check out all those curves).

Inside a bland building is a pretty nice complex with some downright family-friendly touches—which we say only because it's a puzzle that the place is such a hot spot. That's mostly due to the nightlife options—**ghostbar, Playboy Club,** and the nightclubs **Rain** and **Moon** have lines of people every night the facilities are open, offering to sell their firstborn sons for a chance to go inside. Why did those two places catch on so? Not really sure, but you need to know that the entrances to them stand right by the elevators to your hotel room, which means on a busy weekend night, there can be upwards of 4,000 gorgeous and antsy (if not angry) people standing between you and access to your hotel room. If encountering the beautifully dressed and coifed, with 0% body fat and sullen expressions of entitlement, and the 19-year-olds who seek to become all of that (and usually affect a thuggish demeanor) makes you, like us, itch, this might not be the most comfortable place to stay.

Having said all that, note that The Palms has perhaps some of the most comfortable beds in Vegas, thanks to fluffy pillows and duvets that make one reluctant to rise, plus big TVs and huge bathrooms. The workout room is decent size, but the spa is underwhelming, though it does offer yoga and Pilates classes. The pool areas got party-spot makeovers, turning what were kind of bland "stand and pose" watering holes into the kind of trendy must-visit beach areas this kind of crowd loves. Also on the property is **Alizé** (p. 70), in competition for the title Best Restaurant in Town (and owner of the title Most Gorgeous and Romantic Restaurant); a cheap and hearty **buffet;** movie theaters; an excellent child-care facility; and a family-friendly food court.

4321 W. Flamingo Rd. (just west of I-15), Las Vegas, NV 89103. ✆ **866/942-7777** or 702/942-7777. Fax 702/942-6859. www.palms.com. 703 units. $99 and up double. Extra person $30. No discount for children. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; movie theater; nightclub/showroom; 7 restaurants plus a food court; outdoor pool; health club and spa; concierge; business center (free Wi-Fi in business center); salon; 24-hr. room service; in-room massage; babysitting; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe, robe/slippers.

Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino ★ Rio bills itself as a "carnival" atmosphere hotel, which in this case means hectic, crowded, and noisy. The newer section, the Masquerade Village, is actually pretty pleasant, with a very high ceiling, but the older section's low ceilings only seem to accentuate how crowded the area is in both the number of people and the amount of stuff (slot machines, gaming tables,

and so on). All this party atmosphere, by the way, is strictly for adults; the hotel actively discourages guests from bringing children.

The rooms are touted for their size. Every one is a "suite," which does not mean two separate rooms, but rather one large room with a sectional, corner sofa, and coffee table at one end. The dressing areas are certainly larger than average and feature a number of extra amenities, such as refrigerators (unusual for a Vegas hotel room) and small snacks. Windows, running the whole length of the room, are floor to ceiling, with a pretty impressive view of the Strip, Vegas, or the mountains (depending on which way you're facing). The furniture doesn't feel like hotel-room standard, but otherwise the decor is fairly bland.

The hotel's first-rate **Carnival World Buffet** is described in chapter 4. You might consider checking out the **Wine Cellar Tasting Room,** which bills itself as "the world's largest and most extensive collection of fine wines," and hyperbole aside, it's certainly impressive and a must-do for any wine aficionado.

Penn & Teller, the smartest show in town, is reviewed in chapter 8. The casino, alas, is dark and claustrophobic. In case you missed the party/carnival theme, there is a rather bizarre live-action show called ***The Masquerade Show in the Sky.*** It is presented daily at 3, 4, 5, 6:30, 7:30, 8:30, and 9:30pm. Sets modeled after Mardi Gras floats (sort of) move on grids set in the ceiling, filled with costumed performers who lip-sync to music designed to rev up the crowd but not continue the theme (swing selections, for example). These floats are best viewed from the second floor of the village. Down below, dancers do their thing on a stage, while even stranger costumes (ostriches, dragons, and so on) prance next to them. Guests can also don costumes and ride a float, but you have to pay for the privilege.

Out back is a pool with a sandy beach, and two new pools in imaginative fish and shell shapes that seem inviting until you get up close and see how small they are. It could be especially disappointing after you have braved the long, cluttered walk (particularly from the new tower rooms) to get there. Three whirlpool spas nestle amid rocks and foliage, and there are two sand-volleyball courts. The 18-hole championship **Rio Secco golf course** was designed by Rees Jones.

3700 W. Flamingo Rd. (just west of I-15), Las Vegas, NV 89103. ✆ **888/752-9746** or 702/777-7777. Fax 702/777-7611. www.riolasvegas.com. 2,582 units. $99 and up double-occupancy suite. Extra person $30. No discount for children. AE, DC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showrooms; 12 restaurants plus

additional sports book dining; 4 outdoor pools; golf course; health club and spa; concierge; car-rental desk; business center; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; in-room massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe.

TI–Treasure Island ✯✯ What happened to Treasure Island? What happened to the pirates? Why, Vegas grew up, that's what. Originally the most modern family-friendly hotel, the former Treasure Island was a blown-up version of Disneyland's *Pirates of the Caribbean*. But that's all behind them now, and the name change is there to make sure you understand this is a grown-up, sophisticated resort. There might still be the odd pirate element here and there, but only because someone absent-mindedly missed it in a recent ruthless purging of the last remnants. The latest victim is the pirate stunt show out front; it's been revamped so that the pirates, and you have no idea how much we wish we were making this up, now "battle" scantily clad "strippers"—er, "sirens."

To be fair, none of this matters a whit, unless, like us, you got a kick out of the old skulls-and-crossbones decor. What remains, after they stripped the pirate gilt, is such a nice place to stay that in some ways, it even outranks its older sister, The Mirage. The good-size rooms are modified French Regency with a mélange of patterns, but the monochromatic color (many shades of gold) tones it down. While not distinctive, per se, they are much nicer than most in their price range. The good bathrooms feature a large soaking tub—a bather's delight. Best of all, Strip-side rooms have a view of the pirate battle—views are best from the sixth floor on up.

The hotel offers half a dozen restaurants, including **Isla, The Buffet at TI** (p. 94), and a branch of Los Angeles's **Canter's** deli. Treasure Island is home to Cirque du Soleil's ***Mystère*** (p. 153), one of the best shows in town.

There's a full-service spa and health club with a complement of machines, plus sauna, steam, whirlpool, massage, on-site trainers, TVs and stereos with headsets, and anything else you might need (including a full line of Sebastian grooming products in the women's locker rooms). There's a $20-per-day fee to use the facilities.

The pool is not that memorable, with none of the massive foliage and other details that make the one at The Mirage stand out. It's a large, free-form swimming pool with a 230-foot loop slide and a nicely landscaped sun-deck area. It's often crawling with kids, so if that's a turnoff, go elsewhere.

3300 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (at Spring Mountain Rd.), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **800/944-7444** or 702/894-7111. Fax 702/894-7446. www.treasureisland.com. 2,885 units. $89 and up double; $129 and up suite. Extra person $30. No discount for children. Inquire about packages. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showrooms; wedding chapels; 6 restaurants; outdoor pool; health club and spa; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; business center; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, fax, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe.

MODERATE

Bally's Las Vegas ✰ With all the fancy-pants new hotels in town, it's so hard to keep up with the Joneses, or the Wynns as the case may be. And here's poor Bally's, with a perfect location, and it's got no big fountain or Eiffel Tower or anything to make a visitor booking long distance think "Gotta stay there." And we aren't really going to make you change your mind, though we might give you a reason to consider it. After all, you can get a room for a ridiculously low rate these days, and those rooms, which are larger than average, have been redone to an admirable degree, with some swell touches, including modern curvy couches, big TVs, Wi-Fi, and marble this and that. The public areas still feel a little dated, but the hotel is connected to its sister property, Paris Las Vegas, which is swanky and modern enough. Also, it's a stop on the monorail system, so you'll be able to go just about everywhere on foot or by train, and, thanks to those nice rooms, you've got someplace pleasant to return to.

Bally's has the usual range of dining choices and is justly renowned for its **Sterling Sunday Brunch** (p. 92). The casino is large, well lit, and colorful, and there's also a headliner showroom and the splashy ***Jubilee!*** revue (p. 156).

3645 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (at Flamingo Rd.), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **800/634-3434** or 702/739-4111. Fax 702/967-3890. www.ballyslv.com. 2,814 units. $99 and up double; add $35–$60 to rate for concierge floor (including breakfast); $300 and up suite. Extra person $30. Children under 18 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showrooms; 13 restaurants; outdoor pool; 8 night-lit tennis courts; golf desk; health club and spa; video-game arcade; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; business center; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, coffeemaker; high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board.

3 North Strip

VERY EXPENSIVE

Wynn Las Vegas ✰✰ Because Steve Wynn is a modern-day Vegas legend, because this town almost entirely owes its present-day

look and outlook to him, because this hotel (built on the site of the old Desert Inn and opened on the same day, Apr 28, that grand old dame was originally opened) came with a $2.7 billion price tag, and because there was a great deal of hype that used words and phrases such as "like nothing you've ever seen before," there was a corresponding amount of anticipation and expectation surrounding the opening of this, Vegas's newest and perhaps most trumpeted resort. The result? Something that is at once pretty "wow" and a whole lot "It looks like Bellagio." In short, it was something many of us had, in fact, seen before, just down the street (just for a lot more dough—room rates here can run upward of $400 a night).

Well, the hotel feels a little bit cramped when you first enter, and the reception area is impractically proportioned, resulting in some check-in wait issues. There is no discernable theme, which may be disappointing for those looking for, say, a New York–New York style of theme-aganza. The interior has some superior moments, including considerable use of natural light and a floral motif reflected in eye-catching brightly hued floor mosaics, artistic fresh flower arrangements throughout, and, best of all, the conservatory that runs down the center and, like its predecessor at Bellagio, features frequently changed displays. The layout is devoted to old-school Vegas "force the guests to maneuver around and through the casino to get anywhere" floor planning.

In front of the building is a 150-foot tall man-made mountain covered in trees (many mature trees taken from the old Desert Inn golf course) and waterfalls, and this comes with a "free show," which is not viewable from the street. It can be glimpsed only in bits and pieces, though there is a decent shot at a portion of it as you enter from the Strip across from the pedestrian walkway.

These complaints notwithstanding, there's nothing really wrong with the place; we jut nitpick because the pre-hype invited it. The rooms are the hands-down best on the Strip (at least, that aren't suites, such as at The Venetian or THEhotel). Particularly large (it's kind of ruined us for even the more spacious of other rooms), with much-appreciated floor-to-ceiling views (west side shows off the mountain and waterfalls, east side the golf course; both are choice), deeply comfortable beds with high-thread-count sheets and feather beds atop good-quality mattresses plus down comforters, a flatscreen TV, and excellent up-to-the-minute bathrooms complete with quite long and deep tubs, a second flatscreen TV, and silky lemony amenities. There is allegedly turndown service at night, but that can be spotty.

The gym is excellent, stuffed with up-to-the-minute equipment, most with individual TV screens, though we could do without the windows looking onto an interior hallway that make our workout visible to all passersby. The spa area is serene and particularly pretty, with an atrium emitting natural light into the bathing areas. The pool area has four oval-shaped numbers connected by some stretches long enough for laps, plus a "Euro sun-bathing" (read: topless) area that includes outdoor blackjack tables.

Dining options are superb (though generally exceptionally pricey), including **Alex, Bartolotta, Corsa Cucina, Daniel Boulud Brasserie, Red 8,** and the **Wynn Las Vegas Buffet.** A shopping street features high-end choices—Chanel, Cartier, Manolo Blahnik, Gaultier—but still seems a bit more lower-economic (that's relative, mind you) and user-friendly than a similar one at Bellagio. There's also a Ferrari dealership that's so popular they actually charged a gawker admission for a while.

In the end, this is a very adult hotel, in the best sense—classy and mature, that is, and that's a good thing. But still, so was the old Desert Inn, which hit all the right resort notes even in its last days, only to be replaced by the bigger-is-better ethos.

3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (at the corner of Sands Dr.), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **888/320-9966** or 702/770-7100. Fax 702/770-1571. www.wynnlasvegas.com. 3,933 units. $249 and up double. Extra person $50; no discount for children. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showrooms; 2 wedding chapels; 13 restaurants; 5 outdoor pools; fitness center and spa; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; business center; 24-hr. room service; in-room massage; laundry service; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe, high-speed Internet access (for a fee).

MODERATE

Sahara Hotel & Casino ★ *Value* The Sahara is one of the few venerable old casino hotels still standing in Vegas, and it's come a long way since it opened on the site of the old Club Bingo in 1952. How you now view the Sahara may simply depend on which direction the sun is shining. It's been a few years since a spiffy renovation really pulled in some solid Moroccan details (an arched neon dome with Moroccan detailing, plenty of marble and chandeliers, plus small tiles and other Arabian Nights decorations) and caused the loss of the landmark sign, once the tallest in Vegas. Then they added a roller coaster around the outside (quite a good ride, enthusiasts assure us), you know, just because. Meanwhile, the hotel was recently purchased, with plans for a top-to-bottom overhaul with an eye toward making it more like the Palms. This project, which

probably won't start until some time in 2008, will be a good thing. The old place deserves another shot at Vegas significance.

Rooms are currently a bit too motel-room bland (though the windows open, which is unusual for Vegas). Again, this may simply be in comparison to the gleaming new kids in town, a comparison suffered by most of the older hotels. If you are looking for four walls and a mattress, this isn't a bad choice at all. It should be noted that the Sahara feels that it is not as well equipped as other hotels for children and discourages you from bringing yours—and yet, it added a roller coaster. Go figure.

The hotel includes the Sahara Buffet. The casino is a pretty pleasant one to gamble in, and there's a showroom as well. There is one pool.

2535 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (at E. Sahara Ave.), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **888/696-2121** or 702/737-2111. Fax 702/791-2027. www.saharavegas.com. 1,720 units. $45 and up double. Extra person $20. No discount for children. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showroom and lounge w/free entertainment; 5 restaurants; 1 outdoor pool; spa; salon; tour desk; car-rental desk; business center; shopping arcade; limited room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), fridge on request (free but limited availability), hair dryer, iron/ironing board.

Stratosphere Casino Hotel & Tower ★ *Kids* A really neat idea, in that Vegas way, in a really bad location. At 1,149 feet, it's the tallest building west of the Mississippi. In theory, this should have provided yet another attraction for visitors: Climb (okay, elevator) to the top and gaze at the stunning view. But despite being on the Strip, it's a healthy walk from anywhere—the nearest casino is the Sahara, which is 5 very long blocks away. This, and possibly the hefty price charged for the privilege of going up to the top of the tower, may have conspired to keep the crowds away.

And while the crowds might have been justified before, they—and by "they," we mean "you"—might reconsider, especially if you are looking for a friendly place to hang your hat, but nothing more. The smaller-size rooms here are basically motel rooms—really nice motel rooms, but with that level of comfort and style. Then again, you can often get such a room for around $39 a night. (And do join the casino's players club—they tend to offer free rooms with more or less minimal play.) Perfect if you are coming to Vegas with no plans to spend time in your room except to sleep (if even that). Of course, the place just sold, so who knows what's in store for it?

That isn't to say there aren't other elements to like here, including the aforementioned casino, a midway area with kiddie-oriented

rides, a pool with a view, and some of the friendliest, most accommodating staff in town. You can still ride the incredible thrill rides (provided the wind isn't blowing too hard that day) on top of the Tower: the **Big Shot,** a fabulous free-fall ride that thrusts passengers up and down the tower at speeds of up to 45 mph; **X-Scream,** a giant teeter-totter device that gives you the sensation of falling off the side of the building; and **Insanity: the Ride,** a whirly-gig contraption that spins you around more than 900 feet above terra firma, and another yet-to-be-announced ride to replace the closed roller coaster. (See p. 110 for a review of the three remaining adrenaline pumpers.) Indoor and outdoor observation decks offer the most stunning city views you will ever see, especially at night. For the price, this might be the right place for you. Just remember you need a rental car or a lot of cash for cabs to get to the true thrills down the Strip.

In addition to the casino, the hotel sports two production shows: ***American Superstars*** (an impression-filled show, reviewed on p. 150) and ***BITE.***

2000 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (between St. Louis and Baltimore aves.), Las Vegas, NV 89104. ✆ **800/99-TOWER** (998-6937) or 702/380-7777. Fax 702/383-5334. www.stratospherehotel.com. 2,444 units. $39 and up double; $69 and up suite. Extra person $15. Children under 13 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showrooms; wedding chapel; 9 restaurants plus several fast-food outlets; large pool area w/great views of the Strip; children's rides and games; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; shopping arcade; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms; free Wi-Fi in coffee shop in casino. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe.

INEXPENSIVE

Circus Circus Hotel/Casino *(Kids* It's the last bastion of family-friendly Las Vegas, but still isn't what it ought to be, thanks to a reconfiguring a few years ago that took the pervasive Jumbo the Clown decorating scheme and turned it into somewhat more tasteful, more commedia dell'arte harlequins. Like everyone else, even the venerable Circus Circus, once the epitome of kitsch, is trying to be taken more seriously.

That is not to say this is an adult atmosphere; the circus theme remains (admittedly, centered around a casino) and the kid appeal along with it. The midway level features dozens of carnival games, a large arcade (more than 300 video and pinball games), trick mirrors, and ongoing circus acts under the big top from 11am to midnight daily. The world's largest permanent circus, it features renowned trapeze artists, stunt cyclists, jugglers, magicians, acrobats, and

high-wire daredevils. There's also a "be-a-clown" booth where kids can be made up with washable clown makeup and red foam-rubber noses. Circus clowns wander the midway creating balloon animals and cutting up in various ways.

The thousands of rooms here occupy sufficient acreage to warrant a free Disney World–style aerial shuttle (another kid pleaser) and minibuses connecting its many components. Tower rooms have newish, just slightly better-than-average furnishings. The Manor section comprises five white three-story buildings out back, fronted by rows of cypresses. Manor guests can park at their doors, and a gate to the complex that can be opened only with a room key assures security. These rooms are usually among the least expensive in town, but we've said it before and we'll say it again: You get what you pay for. A renovation of these rooms added a coat of paint and some new photos on the wall, but not much else. All sections of this vast property have their own swimming pools; additional casinos serve the main tower and Skyrise buildings; and both towers provide covered parking garages.

Adjacent to the hotel is **Circusland RV Park,** with 399 full-utility spaces and up to 50-amp hookups. It has its own 24-hour convenience store, swimming pools, saunas, whirlpools, kiddie playground, fenced pet runs, video-game arcade, and community room. The rate is $22 and up, with peak rates around $80.

The very reasonably priced **Pink Pony** is Circus Circus's cheerful bubble-gum-pink-and-bright-red 24-hour eatery, with big paintings of clowns on the walls and pink pony carpeting. It offers a wide array of coffee-shop fare, including a number of specially marked "heart-smart" (low-fat, low-cholesterol) items. For gorging, there's always the **Circus Circus Buffet**.

In addition to the ongoing circus acts, there's also **The Adventuredome** (p. 114) indoor theme park out back. There are three full-size casinos, all crowded and noisy, where you can gamble while trapeze acts take place overhead.

2880 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (between Circus Circus and Convention Center), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **877/434-9175** or 702/734-0410. Fax 702/734-5897. www.circuscircus.com. 3,774 units. $59 and up double. Extra person $12. Children under 17 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; circus acts; midway-style carnival games; wedding chapel; 7 restaurants and several fast-food outlets; 2 outdoor pools; video-game arcade; tour desk; car-rental desk; shopping arcade; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, safe.

4 East of the Strip

In this section, we cover hotels near the Convention Center, along with those farther south on Paradise Road, Flamingo Road, and Tropicana Avenue. Note that in the area around Paradise, there are more than a dozen chain-style hotels—various Marriotts (Courtyard, Residence Inn), a Budget Suites, and many others—any one of which is going to provide comfortable, reliable, utterly undistinguished lodging, and all of which often go for more money than they ought to. We've singled out a few here, but they are really quite interchangeable. Do some searching around online, and don't hesitate to try to play them off each other in an attempt to get a deal.

VERY EXPENSIVE

Hard Rock Hotel & Casino ★★ ***Note:*** At press time, the hotel's new owners had announced plans for $750 million worth of new hotel towers, including one that is all suites for VIPs, and renovations. All existing rooms and public spaces will get makeovers, so some of what you read below may have changed.

The hip—from Hollywood and the music industry, among others—flock to the Hard Rock, drawn by the cool 'n' rockin' ambience and the goodies offered by a boutique hotel (657 rooms could be considered a "boutique hotel" only in Vegas). Our problem is that we are not famous pop stars and we do not look enough like Pamela Anderson to warrant the kind of attention that the staff seems to reserve for those types.

It's that Boomer-meets-Gen-X sensibility that finds tacky-chic so very hip. Luckily, the "no-tell motel" look of the older rooms has been updated to more closely match the decor of the rooms in the newer addition. We still aren't crazy about the decor scheme in any of them—even the newer section is too '60s-futuristic hip to come off as posh, and all of it is showing more wear than it ought to. Bathrooms are a big step forward—bigger, brighter, and shinier, though in the older section, they can be cramped, spacewise, in suites. On a high note, the beds have feather pillows, and mattresses are surprisingly comfortable.

The lobby borders the casino, which takes the center position in the round public area you immediately enter when arriving. On the perimeter is a collection of rock memorabilia, ranging from sad (a Kurt Cobain tribute) to cool (various guitars and outfits) to useless (various other guitars and outfits). The Hard Rock now has a permanent, if unwelcome and sad, bit of rock trivia for its

Best Western Mardi Gras Inn **2**
Desert Rose Resort **6**
Hard Rock Hotel & Casino **5**
La Quinta Inn and Suites **3**
Las Vegas Hilton and Suites **1**
Motel 6 **7**
Terrible's **4**

collection: John Entwistle, bassist for the Who, died in one of its rooms on the eve of the start of a tour with the band.

There are several fine restaurants, including **AJs Steakhouse; Nobu**, a branch of highly famed Chef Nobu Matsuhisa's wildly popular Japanese restaurant; the folk-art-filled **Pink Taco;** and **Mr. Lucky's 24/7,** the hotel's round-the-clock coffee shop. The **Hard Rock Cafe** is adjacent to the hotel. **The Joint** (p. 161) is a major showroom that often hosts big-name rock musicians.

If you've ever dreamed of being in a beach-party movie, or on the set of one of those MTV summer beach-house shows, the reconstructed pool at the Hard Rock is for you. Multiple pools are joined by a lazy river and fringed in spots by actual sand beaches. You won't get much swimming done—the water is largely so shallow that it won't hit your knees—but there is swim-up blackjack (they give you little plastic pouches to hold your money), and a stage that features live music in the summer and is fronted by a sandy area, so you can make like Frankie, Annette, and Erik Von Zipper and do the Watusi. Or just pose in a thong bikini and new breasts. Whichever. On warm days and nights, this is *the* hangout scene.

The spa is smaller than its Strip counterparts but is soothing in its posh Space Age–Zen way, and the health club is plenty large and well equipped, offering a full complement of Cybex equipment, stair machines, treadmills, massage, and steam rooms. There's a $20-per-day fee to use the health-club facilities.

4455 Paradise Rd. (at Harmon Ave.), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **800/473-ROCK** (473-7625) or 702/693-5000. Fax 702/693-5588. www.hardrockhotel.com. 657 units. $119 and up double; $250 and up suite. Extra person $35. Children under 13 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showroom; 6 restaurants; 2 outdoor pools w/lazy river and sandy-beach bottom; small health club and spa; concierge; tour desk; salon; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board.

EXPENSIVE

La Quinta Inn and Suites ★ This is a tranquil and immediately visually appealing alternative (within the limited range of chains) to the Strip's hubbub, featuring courtyards, rustic benches, attractive pools, barbecue grills, and picnic tables. The staff is terrific—friendly and incredibly helpful. The rooms are immaculate and attractive. Spend the extra money for an executive room, which features a queen-size bed, a small fridge, a wet bar, and a microwave oven. Double queen-sizes are larger but have no kitchen facilities. And two-bedroom suites are not just spacious, they are really full

apartments, with large living rooms (some with sofa beds), dining areas, and full kitchens. Ground-floor accommodations have patios, and all accommodations feature bathrooms with oversize whirlpool tubs.

Note: The hotel only recently became a La Quinta, and the property is undergoing a million-dollar renovation, which is expected to be complete by October 2008. It's unclear if the renovation will be noisy or otherwise bothersome, so you might want to ask when booking a room.

3970 Paradise Rd. (between Twain Ave. and Flamingo Rd.), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **800/531-5900** or 702/796-9000. Fax 702/796-3537. www.laquinta.com. 251 units. $89 and up double; $99 and up executive queen; $119 and up suite. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self-parking. **Amenities:** Outdoor pool; Jacuzzi; tour desk; car-rental desk; free airport/Strip shuttle; coin-op laundry. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (free), kitchens in executive rooms and suites, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron/ironing board.

MODERATE

Best Western Mardi Gras Inn *Value* This well-run little casino hotel has a lot to offer and is apparently popular with budget-minded Europeans (which can sometimes result in some risqué Continental-style sunbathing around the pool). A block from the Convention Center and close to major properties, its three-story building sits on nicely landscaped grounds. There's a gazebo out back where guests can enjoy a picnic lunch.

Accommodations are all spacious: queen-size-bedded minisuites with sofa-bedded living-room areas and eat-in kitchens, the latter equipped with wet bars, refrigerators, and coffeemakers. All are midlevel-motel okay, but the furnishings are well-tended, if not exactly luxurious. Staying here is like having your own little Las Vegas apartment. A pleasant restaurant/bar off the lobby, open from 6:30am to 11pm daily, serves typical coffee-shop fare.

3500 Paradise Rd. (between Sands Ave. and Desert Inn Rd.), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **800/634-6501** or 702/731-2020. Fax 702/731-4005. www.mardigrasinn.com. 314 units. $59 and up double. Extra person $10. Children under 17 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free parking at your room door. **Amenities:** Small casino; restaurant; outdoor pool; Jacuzzi; guest services desk; tour desk; car-rental desk; free airport shuttle; business center; hair salon; limited room service; coin-op laundry; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, free Wi-Fi, kitchenette, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe.

Desert Rose Resort ★★ *Kids* This all-suite hotel has plenty of extras, making it stand out from its brethren and extremely appealing to families. Sure, the suites themselves are bland, but they have

full kitchens (perfect for families seeking to save some money) and actual balconies, a huge relief in stuffy Vegas where the windows usually don't open. There is a free continental breakfast, and an evening happy hour (Mon–Thurs) with snacks and free beer, wine, and soda. The pool is large, and there are courts for basketball and volleyball. All this just a block from the Strip! This is really a lifesaver for families looking for a nice place not too far off the beaten path; think of the savings with the free breakfast, the snacks, and that full kitchen for other meals.

5051 Duke Ellington Way, Las Vegas, NV 89119. ✆ **800/811-2450** or 702/739-7000. Fax 702/739-9350. www.desertroseresort.com. 278 units. $99 and up 1-bedroom suite (up to 4 people); $169 and up 2-bedroom suite (up to 6 people). Rates include continental breakfast and weekday snacks. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free outdoor parking. **Amenities:** Outdoor pool; Jacuzzi; small exercise room; coin-op laundry; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, full kitchen, hair dryer, iron/ironing board.

Las Vegas Hilton One of the last of the dying breed of old Vegas hotels, the LV Hilton is a favorite of business travelers and, unlike many of its peers, still offers fine accommodations and even a bit more than that. Don't be put off by the distance from the Strip; the monorail stops here, making access there easier than ever. When you consider that on nights when you can't touch a room on the Strip for less than $175, the Hilton will put you in a nice room with plenty of marble (including large bathtubs) and clean, well-maintained furnishings for a decent price, it seems silly to not make the Hilton a top choice more often.

A new owner recently took over the Hilton and has done some major spiffing up. The lobby and older casino areas have been completely remodeled, giving the entire place a much more modern feel. Plus, there are new lounges and restaurants, including TJ's Steakhouse. The Hilton already has a strong showing of restaurants, including a Benihana and a **buffet**. ***Note:*** Children 12 and under can dine in any Hilton restaurant for half the listed menu prices, making this a great option for budget-conscious families.

The **Shimmer Cabaret,** a first-rate casino lounge/nightclub, has live entertainment and ongoing shows nightly. It's a great place to hang out in the evening and features regular sets by local cover bands. One of Elvis's sequined jumpsuits is enshrined in a glass case in the front, near the entrance to the lobby/casino (he played 837 sold-out shows here). There's also a major **showroom**, featuring resident headliner Barry Manilow and other guest performers.

There's a number of shops, plus the ***Star Trek: The Experience*** (p. 109), with its accompanying space-themed casino, one that is especially well designed, with some fun gimmicks.

The third-floor roof comprises a well-landscaped 8-acre recreation deck with a large swimming pool, a 24-seat whirlpool spa, six Har-Tru tennis courts lit for night play, and more. Also on this level is a luxurious 17,000-square-foot state-of-the-art health club offering Nautilus equipment, Lifecycles, treadmills, rowing machines, three whirlpool spas, steam, sauna, massage, and tanning beds. There's a $20-per-day fee to use the facilities, but guests are totally pampered: All toiletries are provided; there are comfortable TV lounges; complimentary bottled waters and juices are served in the canteen; and treatments include facials and oxygen pep-ups.

3000 Paradise Rd. (at Riviera Blvd.), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **888/732-7117** or 702/732-5111. Fax 702/732-5805. www.lvhilton.com. 3,174 units. $49 and up double. Extra person $35. Children under 18 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showrooms; 8 restaurants; outdoor pool; 6 night-lit tennis courts; health club and spa; video-game arcade; car-rental desk; business center; free Wi-Fi in coffee shop; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet access (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board.

INEXPENSIVE

Motel 6 *Value* Fronted by a big neon sign, this Motel 6 is the largest in the country, and it happens to be a great budget choice. Most Motel 6 properties are a little out-of-the-way, but this one is quite close to major Strip casino hotels (the MGM is nearby). It has a big, pleasant lobby, and the rooms, in two-story, cream-stucco buildings, are clean and attractively decorated. Some rooms have showers only; others have tub/shower bathrooms. Local calls are free.

195 E. Tropicana Ave. (at Koval Lane), Las Vegas, NV 89109. ✆ **800/4-MOTEL-6** (466-8356) or 702/798-0728. Fax 702/798-5657. www.motel6.com. 607 units. $45 and up single. Extra person $6. Children under 18 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free parking at your room door. Small pets accepted. **Amenities:** 2 outdoor pools; tour desk; coin-op laundry. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies.

Terrible's ★ *Finds* First of all, this place isn't terrible at all (the owner is Ed "Terrible" Herbst, who operates a chain of convenience stores and gas stations). Secondly, it isn't a bit like the hotel it took over, the rattrap known as the Continental. The Continental is gone, and good riddance. In its place is an unexpected bargain, a truly enjoyable hotel with altogether too often ridiculously low prices. Try this on for size: $39 a night! Near the Strip! Near a bunch of really good restaurants! Hot diggity! So what are we getting? Well,

don't expect much in the way of memorable rooms; they are as basic as can be, and some have views of a wall (though even those get plenty of natural light). Some, however, are considerably larger than others, so ask. The new hotel tower has both suites and standard rooms with new furnishings and flatscreen TVs. The pool area is a surprise, with plenty of palms and other foliage. There's a small but thoroughly stocked casino (not to mention penny slots, continuing the budget theme), plus a very good 24-hour coffee shop. How could you want for anything more? Did we mention the price and location? Plus a free airport shuttle?

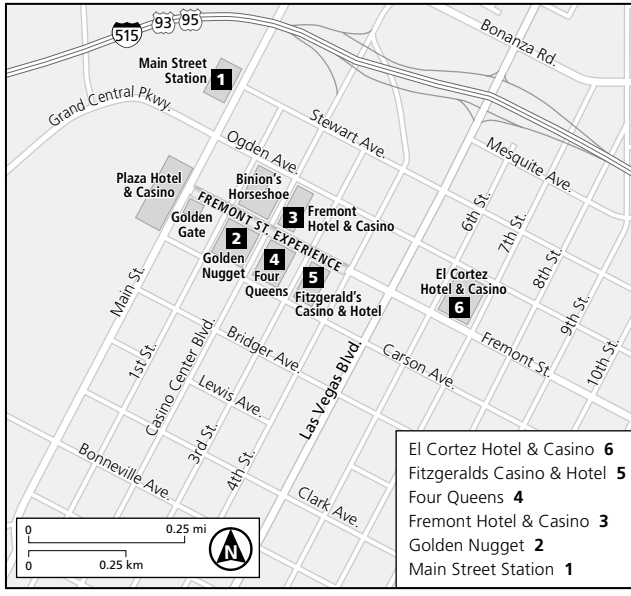
4100 Paradise Rd. (at Flamingo Rd.), Las Vegas, NV 89109 ✆ **800/640-9777** or 702/733-7000. Fax 702/765-5109. www.terribleherbst.com. 325 units. $39 and up double. Extra person $10. Children under 13 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; outdoor pool; 24-hr. room service; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, coffeemaker, hair dryer, pay-per-use Nintendo.

5 Downtown

EXPENSIVE

Golden Nugget ★★ You may have seen the Golden Nugget on the short-lived reality show *The Casino,* which depicted its new hapless owners learning how to own and run a casino-hotel. You may not be surprised to learn the place sold again to the Landry Restaurants chain. Ultimately, it seems like a good thing because this deserving property, the grande dame of Downtown, got some much-needed attention, with new restaurants, remodeled rooms and public spaces, a big new pool, and even an entire new hotel tower going in across the street. The completed phases look terrific; a new color scheme has given it a rich, deep look that is most posh and fresh. Everything feels brighter, lighter, and more spacious.

The Golden Nugget opened in 1946, as the first building in Las Vegas constructed specifically for casino gambling. In 1973, Steve Wynn took it over as his first major project in Vegas and gradually transformed the Old West/Victorian interiors (typical for Downtown) into something more high-rent; marble and brass gleam, and the whole package seems considerably more resortlike and genuinely luxurious, especially for Downtown Vegas. The sunny interior spaces are a welcome change from the Las Vegas tradition of dim artificial lighting. Don't forget their mascot (well, it ought to be): the world's largest gold nugget. The *Hand of Faith* nugget weighs in at 61 pounds, 11 ounces, and is on display for all to see.



In the North Tower, the rooms are slightly larger than in the South (smaller than the newer Strip places but not at all "small"). Rooms are comparable to midrange on the Strip, which makes them quite good for Downtown. You don't have to walk through the casino to get to your room, but you do have to walk a distance to get to the pool, which now has an aquarium, where you can get up close and personal with various marine life (with only a glass wall separating you). The presence of the pool, and general overall quality, makes this the best hotel Downtown for families; the other Downtowners seem geared toward the much older set and/or the single-minded gambler set.

The superb **Golden Nugget Buffet,** which is home to a terrific Sunday brunch, is described in chapter 4.

The Nugget's top-rated health club ($20-per-day fee to use the facilities) offers a full line of Universal equipment, Lifecycles, stair machines, treadmills, rowing machines, free weights, steam sauna, and massage. Salon treatments include everything from leg waxing to seaweed-mask facials. Free Sebastian products are available for sprucing up afterward. The spa's opulent Palladian-mirrored foyer is modeled after a room in New York's Frick Museum.

129 E. Fremont St. (at Casino Center Blvd.), Las Vegas, NV 89101. ✆ **800/846-5336** or 702/385-7111. Fax 702/386-8362. www.goldennugget.com. 1,907 units. $69 and up double; $275 and up suite. Extra person $20. No discount for children. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; showroom; 5 restaurants; outdoor pool; health club and spa; tour desk; car-rental desk; salon; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning; executive-level rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, high-speed Internet (for a fee), hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe, robe/slippers.

MODERATE

Fitzgeralds Casino & Hotel A few years ago, Fitzgeralds got a new owner, the first African-American man to own a Vegas casino, an interesting bit of trivia. Positive changes have come in his wake with total overhauls of the public areas and rooms. Largely gone is the luck-o'-the-Irish theme, which makes us sad when we think about Mr. O'Lucky, the hotel's longtime mascot, but not so much when it comes to all the rest of the leprechauns and shamrocks and other bits of Blarney nonsense. The casino has been brightened up, so it's now one of the nicer places to gamble Downtown; the hallways and check-in area have been redone, and a new outdoor pool—a rare amenity for Downtown in general, and open until the unheard-of (in Vegas) hour of 9pm—opened. Right now, you can expect a sort of Irish country-village walkway, complete with giant fake trees, leading to the room elevators. Fitzgeralds has the only balcony in Downtown from which you can watch the Fremont Street Experience. You can also sit in its McDonald's and gawk at the light show through the atrium windows.

The rooms are clean and comfortable, featuring standard hotel-room decor that you will forget the moment you walk into the hallway. Because this is the tallest building Downtown (34 stories), you get excellent views: snowcapped mountains, Downtown lights, or the Strip. Whirlpool-tub rooms are $20 more and are slightly larger, offering wraparound windows.

301 Fremont St. (at 3rd St.), Las Vegas, NV 89101. ✆ **800/274-LUCK** (274-5825) or 702/388-2400. Fax 702/388-2181. www.fitzgeralds.com. 638 units. $59 and up double. Extra person $15. Children under 12 stay free in parent's room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; 5 restaurants; lounge; outdoor pool; concierge; tour desk; car-rental desk; courtesy car or limo; business center; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, iron/ironing board, safe.

Four Queens Opened in 1966 with a mere 120 rooms, the Four Queens (named for the owner's four daughters) has evolved over the decades into a major Downtown property occupying an entire city block. This property gets sold so often we think it's being

used as a stake in some ongoing card game—it was just sold again, so the usual warnings about potential change still hold. The lobby is small but elegant—in a slightly faded, slightly dated way (with mirrors and huge chandeliers). In the Four Queens, you just know you're in Old Las Vegas. And you are glad. As the staff says, this is the place to stay if you just want to gamble (most of the clientele have been coming here for years). Another draw is the consistently helpful and friendly staff.

A remodel has given the place a bit of a lift. The rather wee rooms, despite the freshening, aren't going to blow you away, but note that the ones in the South Tower are a shade larger than the others, though we wouldn't hold any multiperson slumber parties in either. In most cases, rooms in the North Tower offer views of the Fremont Street Experience. The restaurant, **Hugo's Cellar,** has a cozy lounge with a working fireplace, and two bars serve the casino.

202 Fremont St. (at Casino Center Blvd.), Las Vegas, NV 89101. ✆ **800/634-6045** or 702/385-4011. Fax 702/387-5122. www.fourqueens.com. 690 units. $39 and up double; $119 and up suite. Extra person $15. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; 3 restaurants; 2 bars; room service; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron/ironing board, safe.

INEXPENSIVE

El Cortez Hotel & Casino ★★ Finally, a much-needed (as opposed to just done because everyone else is doing it) and well-conceived renovation has given an old-timer an unexpected new shot of life. The public areas are totally refreshed: Check out those cherrywood and oxidized metal panel sheets on the walls—you just don't see something that contemporary and design intensive all that often in Downtown. The new entrance exterior with its stonework, planters, hitching posts, and stone driveway feels like an entirely new hotel. There are even plans to take out a parking lot and turn it into a proper plaza with trees, fountains, and the like! Additional plans include a South Beach–themed upscale annex in an adjacent, currently shabby property. Rooms (some quite large) have gotten new traditional furnishings, flatscreen TVs, nice new (if small) bathrooms, armoires with actual minifridges, and Wi-Fi (for a fee). We rank them right behind Main Street Station for recommendable affordable Downtown lodgings. There is a new, popular Chinese buffet, and the steakhouse Roberta's is solidly good. Many of the employees have been here well over a dozen years, which says a lot. Local legend Jackie Gaughin still lives in the penthouse and wanders through the property. Overall, it's now a cool old Vegas place of the

variety that doesn't exist any more. Forget the manufactured versions. This is the real thing, updated but without losing its identity, and for probably half the price (or even a third).

600 Fremont St. (between 6th and 7th sts.), Las Vegas, NV 89101. ✆ **800/634-6703** or 702/385-5200. Fax 702/474-3626. www.elcortezhotelcasino.com. 428 units. $35 and up double; $60 minisuite. Extra person $8. AE, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; 3 restaurants. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

Fremont Hotel & Casino When it opened in 1956, the Fremont was the first high-rise in Downtown Las Vegas. Wayne Newton got his start here, singing in the now-defunct Carousel Showroom. Step just outside the front door and there you are, in the **Fremont Street Experience.** Rooms are larger, more comfortable, and more peaceful than you might expect (though bathrooms are tiny). Up until midnight you can hear, sometimes all too well, music and noise from the Fremont St. Experience show, but if you are in bed before midnight in Vegas, it's your own fault. The hotel encourages environmental awareness by changing linens only every other day; upon request, it can be more often, but why not help out the earth a bit? For that matter, why not help out your wallet a bit and stay here?

The Fremont boasts an Art Deco restaurant called the **Second Street Grill** (p. 88) along with a buffet. Guests can use the swimming pool and RV park at the nearby California Hotel, another Sam Boyd enterprise.

200 E. Fremont St. (between Casino Center Blvd. and 3rd St.), Las Vegas, NV 89101. ✆ **800/634-6182** or 702/385-3232. Fax 702/385-6229. www.fremontcasino.com. 447 units. $59 and up double. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free valet parking; no self-parking. **Amenities:** Casino; 5 restaurants; access to outdoor pool at nearby California Hotel; tour desk; car-rental desk; free shuttle to Sam's Town; limited room service; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, DVD players available upon request, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron/ironing board.

Main Street Station ★★ *Finds* Though not actually on Fremont Street, the Main Street Station is just 2 short blocks away, barely a 3-minute walk. Considering how terrific it is, this is hardly an inconvenience. In our opinion, this is one of the nicest hotels in Downtown and one of the best bargains in the city.

The overall look here, typical of Downtown, is early-20th-century San Francisco. However, unlike everywhere else, the details here are outstanding, resulting in a beautiful hotel by any measure. Outside, gas lamps flicker on wrought-iron railings and stained-glass windows. Inside, you'll find hammered-tin ceilings, ornate

antique-style chandeliers, and lazy ceiling fans. The small lobby is filled with wood panels, long wooden benches, and a front desk straight out of the Old West. Even the cashier cages look like antique brass bank tellers' cages. It's all very appealing and just plain pretty. An enclosed bridge connects the hotel with the California Hotel across the street, where you will find shopping and a kids' arcade.

The long and narrow rooms are possibly the largest in Downtown, though the ornate decorating downstairs does not extend up here. A 2005 overhaul gave them positively modern furnishings, new carpet and wall coverings, updated fixtures in the bathrooms, and more, turning what were simple but nice rooms into plain old nice rooms. The bathrooms are small but well appointed. Rooms on the north side overlook the freeway, and the railroad track is nearby. The soundproofing seems quite strong—we couldn't hear anything when inside, but if you're concerned, request a room on the south side.

The **Pullman Grille** is the steak-and-seafood place, and is much more reasonably priced than similar (and considerably less pretty) places in town. The stylish **Triple 7 Brew Pub** is described in detail in chapter 8. The excellent **Main Street Station Garden Court** buffet is described in chapter 4.

200 N. Main St. (between Fremont St. and I-95), Las Vegas, NV 89101. ✆ **800/465-0711** or 702/387-1896. Fax 702/386-4466. www.mainstreetcasino.com. 452 units. $59 and up standard double. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free self- and valet parking. **Amenities:** Casino; 3 restaurants; outdoor pool next door at the California Hotel; car-rental desk; dry cleaning; nonsmoking rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies.

4

Where to Dine

Among the many images that people have of Las Vegas are cheap food deals—bargains so good the food is practically free. They think of the buffets—all a small country can eat—for only $4.99!

All that is true, but frankly, eating in Las Vegas is no longer something you don't have to worry about budgeting for. The buffets are certainly there—no good hotel would be without one—as are the cheap meal deals, but you get what you pay for. Some of the cheaper buffets, and even the more moderately priced ones, are mediocre at best, ghastly and inedible at worst. And we don't even want to *think* about those 99¢ beef stew specials.

However, there is some good news on the Vegas food scene. Virtually overnight, there was an explosion of new restaurants that are actually of high quality. Vegas is now able to hold its head up alongside other big cities as a legitimate foodie destination.

Look at this partial list: Celebrity chefs Wolfgang Puck and Emeril Lagasse have half a dozen restaurants in town between them; multi-Michelin-starred chef Joël Robuchon opened two restaurants in the MGM Grand; deservedly famed chef Julian Serrano reigns at Bellagio's **Picasso;** Thomas Keller, the brains behind Napa Valley's French Laundry, has a branch of his **Bouchon** bistro; legendary chef Alain Ducasse is behind **Mix** at THEhotel; and branches of L.A., New York, San Francisco, and Boston high-profile names such as **Pinot Brasserie, Le Cirque, Aureole, Olives, Border Grill, Nobu,** and others have all rolled into town.

Unfortunately, this boom has affected only the very highest end of the price category. Even as dedicated foodies, we can't in good conscience tell you to eat only at places that will require taking out a small bank loan—except we just don't really have any other options. For the moment, with a few exceptions, it's hard to eat extremely well in Vegas (especially on the Strip) for a down-to-earth price. If you get off the Strip, however, you can find some cheaper, more interesting alternatives, which we have listed below. If you're staying on the Strip and you don't have the mobility of a car, your food options will be severely limited.

There are tricks to surviving dining in Vegas. If you can, make reservations in advance, particularly for the better restaurants (you may well get to town, planning to check out some of the better spots, only to find they are totally booked throughout your stay). Eat as much as you can during off-hours, which admittedly are hard to find. But you know that noon to, say, 1:30 or 2pm is going to be prime for lunch, and 5:30 to 8:30pm (and just after the early shows get out) for dinner. Speaking of time, give yourself plenty of it, particularly if you have to catch a show.

And if you want to sample the creations of a celebrity chef, but took a beating at the craps table? Check our listings to see which of the high-profile restaurants are open for lunch. Sure, usually the more interesting and exotic items are found at dinner, but the midday meal is usually no slouch and can be as much as two-thirds cheaper. Or skip that highfalutin stuff all together. To locate budget fare, check local newspapers (especially Fri editions) and free magazines (such as *Vegas Visitor* and *What's On in Las Vegas*), which are given away at hotel reception desks (sometimes these sources also yield money-saving coupons). The late-night specials—a complete steak meal for just a couple dollars—are also an important part of a good, decadent Vegas experience (and a huge boon for insomniacs).

1 South Strip

VERY EXPENSIVE

Aureole ★★★ NOUVELLE AMERICAN The primary fame of this branch of a New York City fave (it's pronounced are-ree-*all*), run by Charlie Palmer, comes from their gimmicky wine tower, four stories of probably the finest wine collection in Vegas, made even more sensational thanks to catsuit-clad lovelies who are hoisted on wires to reach bottles requested from the uppermost heights. The menu is a three-course prix fixe, though if you are winsome enough, they might send out luxurious extras such as pâté on brioche topped with shaved truffles. Otherwise, expect such marvels as a tender roasted lamb loin and braised shoulder, or a rack of venison accompanied by sweet-potato purée and chestnut crisp. Everything demonstrates the hand of a true chef in the kitchen, someone paying close attention to his work and to his customers. Service is solicitous. Desserts are playful, including a bittersweet chocolate soufflé with blood-orange sorbet and a Bartlett pear crisp with toasted cinnamon brioche and lemon-grass foam. Oh, and that wine tower?

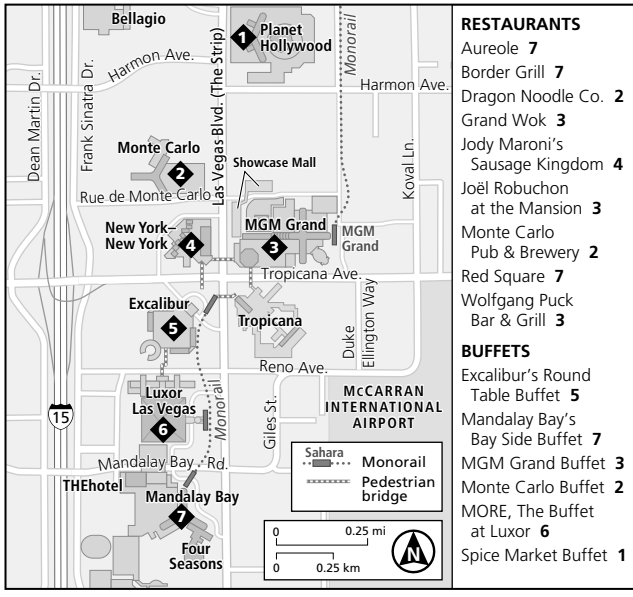
You can navigate it from your table with an innovative and highly engrossing hand-held computer that not only helps you through the vast depths of the list, but makes suggestions for you based on your meal choices.

In Mandalay Bay, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **877/632-1766.** www.aureolelv.com. Reservations required. Prix-fixe dinner $75; tasting menu $95. AE, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 6–10:30pm; Fri–Sat 5:30–10:30pm.

Joël Robuchon at the Mansion ★★★ FRENCH This is unbelievably, heart-stoppingly, stratospherically expensive. But it's here because legendary chef Joël Robuchon—the first (and youngest) chef to win three consecutive Michelin stars—has proven that all the hype is justified. The *Los Angeles Times* gave Robuchon their highest rating—only the second time they've done so—while the *New York Times* reviewer proclaimed this "some of the very best French food I've eaten on this continent." These are no pushovers. This is not food as fuel, food to bolt down greedily (even though you may want to), but to slowly savor. Pay attention as you chew, and notice how many layers of interest are revealed. Great care was taken in choosing and combining ingredients, to create not fuss but both surprise and a sense of rightness. Exquisite, superb—name your superlative, and it's been levied on this remarkable restaurant.

Chef Robuchon is not personally in the kitchen that often, but he has entrusted this kitchen to some of his former top employees. The menu changes very frequently, with many key ingredients flown in daily from France. And the service reminds one that Michelin ratings take that into account, too. None of this comes cheap. Could it possibly be worth it? Look at it this way: You can easily lose the cost of a meal here in 15 forgettable minutes at a blackjack table (not that we did just that, ahem) or you can spend 3 hours slowly enjoying a meal, storing up much more pleasurable (presumably) memories. And then there is always the somewhat less expensive—that's relative, of course—neighbor **L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon** (it won the James Beard Award for best new restaurant in 2007), where the focus is on counter seating, an intimate interactive experience between diner, server, and chef.

In MGM Grand, 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/891-7925.** Reservations strongly recommended. Jacket required. 6-course tasting menu $225; 16-course tasting menu $360. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Weekdays 5:30–10pm; weekends 5:30–10:30pm. For L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon: ✆ **702/891-7925.** Reservations strongly recommended. 8-course discovery menu $135; small plates $16–$32; main courses $38–$70. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Weekdays 5:30–10pm; weekends 5:30–10:30pm.



Red Square ★★ CONTINENTAL/RUSSIAN Let's go dancing on the grave of the USSR. The restaurant's ice-covered bar keeps your drinks nicely chilled. Czarist excess is celebrated in the selection of 150 different kinds of vodka, perhaps the largest collection in the world.

If you can tear your eyes away from the theme-run-amuck, you might notice the food is quite good. Blow your expense account on some caviar (we found we liked nutty osetra better than stronger Beluga), properly chilled in ice, served with the correct pearl spoon, accompanied by the right accouterments. Or, more affordably, nosh on Siberian nachos—smoked salmon, citron caviar, and crème fraîche. The chef's special is a Roquefort-crusted, tender filet mignon, with some soft caramelized garlic and a fine reduction sauce; it's a grand piece of meat. Desserts are not as clever but are worth saving room for, especially the warm chocolate cake with a liquid center and the strawberries Romanoff.

In Mandalay Bay, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/632-7407.** Reservations recommended. Main courses $22–$46. AE, DC, MC, V. Sun–Fri 5–10:30pm; Sat 3–10:30pm.

EXPENSIVE

Border Grill ★★★ MEXICAN For our money, here's the best Mexican food in town. This big, cheerful space houses a branch of the much-lauded L.A. restaurant, conceived and run by the Food Network's "Two Hot Tamales," Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger. This is truly authentic Mexican home cooking, but with a *nuevo* twist. So don't expect precisely the same dishes you'd encounter in your favorite corner joint, but do expect fresh and fabulous food, arranged as brightly on the plates as the decor on the walls. Stay away from the occasionally bland fish and head right toward rich and cheesy dishes such as chiles rellenos (with perfect black beans) and chicken *chilaquiles* (a sister to the taco), or try new items such as mushroom empanadas. Don't miss the dense but fluffy Mexican chocolate cream pie (with a meringue crust).

In Mandalay Bay, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/632-7403.** www.bordergrill.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses $15–$28. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11:30am–10pm; Fri–Sat 11:30am–11pm.

MODERATE

Grand Wok ★★ *Value* ASIAN No longer thoroughly Pan-Asian but still a solid choice for sushi and, more importantly, budget fare in the form of the combo soup full of noodles and different kinds of meat. It's particularly nice and more affordable than the usual hotel restaurant—and the primarily Asian clientele clearly agrees. Note that soup portions are most generous; four people could easily split one order and have a nice and very inexpensive lunch, an unexpected bargain option for the Strip.

In MGM Grand, 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/891-7777.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses $9–$19; sushi rolls and pieces $4.50–$15. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Restaurant Sun–Thurs 11am–10pm, Fri–Sat 11am–1am; sushi bar Mon–Thurs 5–10pm, Fri–Sat 11am–midnight, Sun 11am–10pm.

Wolfgang Puck Bar & Grill ★★ CALIFORNIA This transformed Puck Café is still a desirable, if slightly less affordable, option in the MGM Grand. There is nothing surprising on the menu if you've eaten in any modern cafe in the post-Puck era. But there's enough variety that everyone in your party should find something to please them, from crab cakes with basil aioli to a prime rib sandwich to homemade veal ravioli to Puck's pizzas, plus a good wine cellar. The fresh salads (we love the seasonal roasted beet) are better constructed than those at comparable eateries in town, while Puck's hand is still on someone's helm; witness the silly potato chips drizzled with truffle oil and melted bleu cheese. It's all set in an almost

entirely open space, a minimalist-art take on a country kitchen, and a bit noisy thanks to proximity to the casino floor and cheers from the nearby sports book. Expect it to be crowded right before and after *KA,* but quiet during.

In MGM Grand, 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/891-3019.** www.wolfgangpuck.com. Reservations not accepted. Lunch $18–$22; dinner $28–$38 (most under $25). AE, DC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11:30am–10:30pm; Fri–Sat 11:30am–11:30pm.

INEXPENSIVE

Dragon Noodle Co. ✪✪ ASIAN FUSION A strong choice for a reasonably priced meal, Dragon Noodle is one of the better Chinese restaurants in town. We were glad to see that in addition to the usual suspects, there are some other interesting (if not radically less safe) choices on the menu. Food is served family-style and prepared in an open kitchen, so you know it's fresh. Be sure to try the very smooth house green tea. You might let your waiter choose your meal for you, but try the crispy Peking pork, the sweet pungent shrimp, the pot stickers, and perhaps the generous seafood soup. We were a little disappointed by the popular sizzling black-pepper chicken. And they now have a sushi bar!

In Monte Carlo Resort & Casino, 3770 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/730-7965.** www.dragonnoodleco.com. Main courses $5.50–$17 (many under $10). AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11am–10pm; Fri–Sat 11am–11pm.

Jody Maroni's Sausage Kingdom ✪✪✪ DELI What began as a humble stand on the Venice boardwalk in Los Angeles has expanded into a sausage empire, and we are glad. You will be, too, especially if you take a chance on their menu and don't just stick with the basic hot dog (though they do offer three tempting varieties) and instead try something a little more adventurous, like the tequila chicken sausage made with jalapeños, corn, and lime. Or just vary your basic sweet Italian sausage with a hotter variety. Either way, you can top it with raw or grilled onions and peppers as it gets stuffed into a sesame-seed soft roll. Maybe some chili fries, too. This is our first choice for fast food in the immediate area.

In New York–New York, 3790 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/740-6969.** www.jodymaroni.com. Reservations not accepted. $6–$11. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11am–8pm (sometimes earlier if business is slow).

Monte Carlo Pub & Brewery ✪✪✪ *Kids* *Finds* PUB FARE Lest you think we are big, fat foodie snobs who can't appreciate a meal unless it comes drenched in truffles and caviar, we hasten to direct you to this lively, working microbrewery (with a sort of rustic

factory appearance) and its hearty, not-so-highfalutin food. No fancy French frills, and best of all, no inflated prices. Combine the general high quality with generous portions—a nachos appetizer could probably feed eight (though it was not the best nachos appetizer ever)—and this may be a better deal than most buffets. It's not, however, the place for a quiet rendezvous, with about 40 TVs spread throughout (a sports fan's dream) and music blaring.

Earning recent raves were the short ribs, in a fine barbecue sauce, cooked just right; the excellent chicken fingers and shrimp fried in beer appetizers; and the garlic pizza. We also highly enjoyed the double-chocolate-fudge suicide brownie, though really, what's not to love about something like that? After 9pm, only pizza is served, and dueling pianos provide dance music and entertainment.

In Monte Carlo Resort & Casino, 3770 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/730-7777.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses $6–$15. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11am–2am.

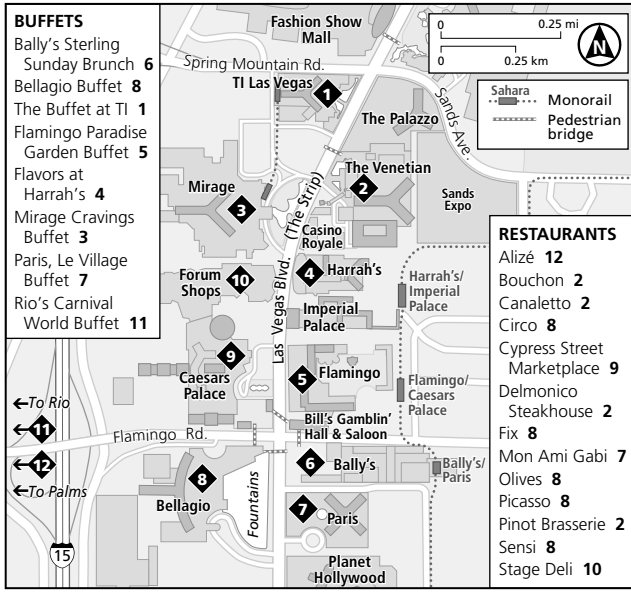
2 Mid-Strip

VERY EXPENSIVE

Alizé ★★★ FRENCH Just a perfect restaurant, thanks to a combination of the most divine dining room and view in Vegas, not to mention one of the best chefs in Vegas (Andre, of the eponymous and excellent restaurants Downtown and in the Monte Carlo). Situated at the top of the Palms Hotel, three sides of full-length windows allow a panoramic view of the night lights of Vegas; obviously, window-side tables are best, but even seats in the center of the room have a good view. Best of all, unlike many other celeb-chef operations, this one is carefully overseen by the big man himself. The menu changes seasonally, but anything you order will be heavenly.

We've rarely been disappointed here. For an appetizer, try the shrimp and artichoke timbale trimmed with avocado and cucumber relish. The foie gras can come in a pink-grapefruit-and-citrus-honey reduction, a tangy combination. Fish can be a little dry here, so we suggest the stunning New York steak with summer truffle *jus* and potato herb pancakes. Desserts are similarly outstanding and often of great frivolity, such as sorbet in a case of browned marshmallow, floating in raspberry soup. Yeah, we're going over-the-top on this one, but we bet you won't think we're wrong.

In Palms Casino Resort, 4321 W. Flamingo Rd. ✆ **702/951-7000.** Fax 702/951-7002. www.alizelv.com. Reservations strongly recommended. Entrees $30–$67; 5-course tasting menu $95; 7-course tasting menu $125. AE, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 5:30–10pm; Fri–Sat 5:30–11pm.



Delmonico Steakhouse ★★ CREOLE/STEAK You might well feel that Emeril Lagasse is omnipresent. This incarnation is a steakhouse version of his hard-core classic Creole restaurant; this ever-so-slight twist is just enough to make it a superior choice over the more disappointing New Orleans locale. It's set in two dining rooms; the left one is '70's den ugly—choose instead the Neutra/Schindler–influenced right side.

You can try both Emeril concoctions and fabulous cuts of red meat. You can't go wrong with most appetizers, especially the superbly rich smoked mushrooms with homemade tasso over pasta—it's enough for a meal in and of itself—any of the specials, or the gumbo, particularly if it's the hearty, near-homemade country selection. If you want to experiment, definitely do it with the appetizers. You're better off steering clear of complex entrees, no matter how intriguing they sound. We've found them to be generally disappointing, while the more deceptively simple choices are more successful. The bone-in rib steak is rightly recommended (skip the gummy béarnaise sauce in favor of the fabulous homemade Worcestershire or the A.O.K. sauce). Sides are hit-or-miss—the creamed spinach was too salty, but the sweet-potato purée (a special, but

maybe they'll serve you a side if you ask sweetly) was most definitely a winner. Too full for dessert? No, you aren't. Have a chocolate soufflé, a bananas Foster cream pie, a chocolate Sheba (a sort of dense chocolate mousse), or the lemon icebox pie.

In The Venetian, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/414-3737.** www.emerils.com. Reservations strongly recommended for dinner. Main courses $21–$49. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2pm; Sun–Thurs 5–10pm; Fri–Sat 5–10:30pm.

Fix ★★ AMERICAN A just-right synthesis of gourmet dining, fun dining, and accessible dining. Looking, as one visitor described it, like a "giant clam opening up toward the casino," the menu continues this playful vibe. Look for the silly presentation called "Forks," appetizers of smoked salmon and caviar skewed on forks, served tines in the air. Or desserts such as "Shake and Cake" (espresso shake and a brownie), and delightful banana sugared doughnuts with chocolate and peanut butter dipping sauce.

But before those clever conclusions come particularly good (in a town not known for same) fish selections, including "The Ultimate Shell," a selection of seafood (from clams to lobster) that comes in an XL size of dreamy decadence. Best of all are the steaks, which are grilled over cherrywood, giving the meat a smoky yet fruity flavor. From the trendy "small plates" to hamburgers, this is one complete menu, all right. All in all, a good compromise fancy location for a special occasion or just a treat of a meal: not so froufrou that basic eaters will be dismayed, not so simplistic that foodies will feel cheated, and not in the least bit stodgy or intimidating.

In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/693-8400.** Reservations recommended. Main courses $29–$48. AE, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 5pm–midnight; Fri–Sat 5pm–2am.

Picasso ★★★ FRENCH A Spanish chef who cooks French cuisine in an Italian-themed hotel in Vegas? Trust us, it works. This may well be the best restaurant in Vegas, and given the sudden serious competition for such a title, that says a lot. Madrid-born chef Julian Serrano (whose Masa was considered the finest French restaurant in San Francisco) offers an extraordinary dining experience (plus, $30 million worth of Picassos gaze down over your shoulders while you eat).

Needless to say, Serrano's cooking is a work of art that can proudly stand next to the masterpieces. The menu changes nightly and is always a choice between a four- or five-course fixed-price dinner or tasting menu. The night we ate there, we were bowled over by roasted Maine lobster with a "trio" of corn—kernels, sauce, and a corn flan

that was like eating slightly solid sunshine. Hudson Valley foie gras was crusted in truffles and went down most smoothly. A filet of roasted sea bass came with a light saffron sauce and dots of cauliflower purée. And finally, pray that they're serving the lamb rôti—it was an outstanding piece of lamb, perfectly done, tender, and crusted with truffles. Portions are dainty, but so rich that you'll have plenty to eat without groaning and feeling heavy when you leave. Desserts are powerful, yet prettily constructed. A molten chocolate cake leaves any other you may have tried in the dust, and comes with ice cream made with imported European chocolate. Everything is delivered by an attentive staff that makes you feel quite pampered.

In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **877/234-6358.** Reservations recommended. Prix-fixe 4-course dinner $105; 5-course degustation $115. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Wed–Mon 6–9:30pm.

EXPENSIVE

Bouchon ★★★ BISTRO Thomas Keller made his name with his Napa Valley restaurant French Laundry, considered by many to be the best restaurant in the United States. Bouchon is a version of his Napa Valley bistro. We had mixed expectations. On the one hand, he's a certifiably genius chef. On the other hand, he's not going to be in the kitchen, which will be producing bistro (which is to say, not innovative) food.

Our negative expectations were confounded by the right, left, and center of the menu—yeah, we've tried nearly all of it and can report that humble though these dishes sound, in nearly every case they are gold-standard versions of classics. Someone is certainly keeping a close eye on this kitchen, and that someone has learned the lessons well. The sweet and supremely fresh (kept in water until the moment they are served to you) Snow Creek oysters seem to melt on contact with your tongue. Don't miss the bacon and poached-egg frisee salad, or the cleanly seared salmon over poached leeks, prepared to such perfection it doesn't need the accompanying sauce. Gnocchi is earthy and assertive, a peasant version of an Italian favorite, while beef bourguignon is exactly as you expect it to be, in the divine perfection sense. This is a superlative Vegas restaurant, and while it may be hard to reconcile the prices with the apparent simplicity of the food, recall that it takes serious skill to make even the most humble of dishes correctly, as your palate will reassure you.

In The Venetian, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/414-6200.** Reservations strongly recommended. Main courses $8–$22 at breakfast, $22–$45 at dinner; Sat–Sun brunch $11–$25. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 7–10:30am and 5–11pm; Sat–Sun brunch 8am–2pm; oyster bar daily 3–11pm.

Canaletto ✪✪ ITALIAN Come here for solid, true Italian fare—and that means less sauce-intensive than the red-checked-tablecloth establishments of our American youths. Here, the emphasis is on the pasta, not the accompaniments. This place is all the more enjoyable for being perched on the faux St. Mark's Square; in theory, you can pretend you are sitting on the edge of the real thing, a fantasy we don't mind admitting we briefly indulged in. A risotto of porcini, sausage, and white-truffle oil was full of strong flavors, while the wood-fired roast chicken was perfectly moist. You know, a properly roasted chicken should be a much-celebrated thing, and that alone may be a reason to come here.

In The Venetian Grand Canal Shoppes, 3377 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/733-0070.** Reservations recommended for dinner. Main courses $14–$36. AE, DC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11:30am–11pm; Fri–Sat 11:30am–midnight.

Circo ✪✪ ITALIAN Yes, this is the less expensive offering from the same family that brings you Le Cirque, but going to one does not excuse you from going to the other. (By the way, "less expensive" is a relative term.)

Le Cirque's gourmet French haute cuisine does not prepare you for what to expect from Circo, or, for that matter, vice versa. Ignore the bright primary-color scheme, meant to evoke the circus but instead sadly recalling outdated hotel buffets (albeit with expensive wood grain), in favor of watching the dancing fountains outside. And then order the *mista di Campo,* a lovely little salad, both visually and in terms of taste; it's a creative construction of vegetables bound with cucumber and topped with a fab balsamic vinaigrette. Follow that with a perfect tagliatelle with rock shrimp—it comes loaded with various crustacean bits in a light sauce. Note that appetizer portions of pastas are plenty filling and cheaper than full-size servings. Entrees usually include more elaborate dishes, such as breast of Muscovy duck with dried organic fruit in port-wine sauce. Save room for desserts such as *panna cotta* (Italian cream–filled doughnuts) or *tutto cioccolato,* consisting of chocolate mousse, ice cream, and crumb cake.

In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/693-8150.** Reservations recommended. Main courses $16–$59. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 5:30–10:30pm.

Olives ✪✪ ITALIAN/MEDITERRANEAN If there were an Olives in our neighborhood, we would eat there regularly. A branch of Todd English's original Boston-based restaurant, Olives is a strong choice for a light lunch that need not be as expensive as you might think. Here's how to enjoy a moderately priced meal here: Munch

on the focaccia bread, olives, and excellent tapenade they give you at the start, have a lovely salad (maybe of Bibb lettuce, Maytag bleu cheese, and walnut dressing), and then split a flatbread. Think pizza with an ultrathin crust (like a slightly limp cracker), topped with delicious combinations such as the highly recommended Moroccan spiced lamb, eggplant purée, and feta cheese. They are rich and wonderful—split one between two people, and you have an affordable and terrific lunch. Or try a pasta; we were steered toward the simple but marvelous spaghettini with roasted tomatoes, garlic, and Parmesan, and were happy with it. The constructed, but not too fussy, food gets more complicated and costly at night, adding an array of meats and chickens, plus pastas such as butternut squash with brown butter and sage.

In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/693-7223.** www.toddenglish.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses $16–$23 at lunch, $27–$49 at dinner; flatbreads $17. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11am–10:30pm.

Pinot Brasserie ★★ BISTRO This is the one incarnation of a series of well-regarded Los Angeles restaurants whose mother ship, Patina, regularly tops "Best of" lists among City of Angels foodies. While the more innovative cooking is going on back in L.A., Pinot reliably delivers French and American favorites that are thoughtfully conceived and generally delicious. It's an excellent choice if you want a special meal that is neither stratospherically expensive nor too complex.

Salads are possibly fresher and more generous than other similar starters in town, and they can come paired with various toppings for crostini (toasted slices of French bread) such as herbed goat cheese. Word is they might add Patina's delightful butternut-squash soup to the menu here, and if so, you should try it. The signature dish, beloved by many, is a roasted chicken accompanied by heaping mounds of garlic fries, but if you wish to get a little more elaborate (and yet rather light), thin slices of smoked salmon with celery rémoulade could be a way to go. Desserts are lovely, and ice cream is homemade—the chocolate alone should make you wish you'd never eaten at 31 Flavors, because it was wasted calories compared to this.

In The Venetian, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/414-8888.** www.patinagroup.com. Reservations recommended for dinner. Main courses $10–$19 at breakfast, $12–$25 at lunch, $21–$36 at dinner. AE, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Fri 7–10am, 11:30am–3pm, and 5:30–10pm; Sat 7am–3pm and 5:30–10:30pm; Sun 7am–3pm and 5:30–10pm.

Sensi ✪✪ ECLECTIC It's usually a truism, as far as restaurants go, "jack of all trades, master of none." Sensi seems to be an exception, given that its menu is made up of Italian (fancy pizzas and pastas), wood-grilled American options (burgers, fish, chicken), and Asian-influenced dishes (and they mean "Pan-Asian," thus tandoori and sushi both). And yet, it does it all very well indeed. You are probably best off here at lunchtime, sampling pizza al prosciutto or wok-fried shrimp, for more moderate prices than found at dinner. Best of all is the "Sensi 41," a healthy take on the bento box, featuring such things as miso-glazed Chilean sea bass, some tender sashimi, piquant rice, and, disconcertingly, mozzarella salad. They finish it up with two small, cunning servings of fancy ice cream in wee cones. And do try that homemade ginger ale.

In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **877/234-6358.** Main courses $14–$22 at lunch, $22–$44 at dinner. AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–2:30pm and 5–10:30pm.

MODERATE

Mon Ami Gabi ✪✪ BISTRO This charming bistro is our new favorite local restaurant. It has it all: a delightful setting, better than average food, and affordable prices. Sure, it goes overboard in trying to replicate a classic Parisian bistro, but the results are less cheesy than most Vegas attempts at atmosphere, and the patio seating on the Strip (no reservations taken there—first-come, first-served) actually makes you feel like you're in a real, not a pre-fab, city. You can be budget-conscious and order just the very fine onion soup, or you can eat like a real French person and order classic steak and *pommes frites* (the filet mignon is probably the best cut, if not the cheapest). There are plenty of cheaper options (which is why we listed this place in the "moderate" category, by the way), especially at lunch. Yes, they have snails, and we loved 'em. Desserts, by the way, are massive and should be shared (another way to save). The baseball-size profiteroles (three or four to an order) filled with fine vanilla ice cream and the football-size bananas Foster crepe are particularly recommended. Ooh la la!

In Paris Las Vegas, 3655 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/944-GABI.** www.monamigabi.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses $18–$40. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Fri 11:30am–3:30pm; Sun–Thurs 5–11pm; Fri–Sat 5pm–midnight; Sat–Sun brunch 11am–3:30pm.

INEXPENSIVE

Cypress Street Marketplace ✪✪ *Kids* FOOD COURT Often when we go to a Vegas buffet (and we are not alone in this), we sigh over all the choices, all those different kinds of pretty good cuisines

there for the taking, but of course, we can't possibly try everything. And yet, in some of the higher priced venues, we are charged as if we can. Here, in this modern version of the classic food court, it's sort of like being at a well-stocked buffet; there's darn fine barbecue (including North Carolina–influenced pulled pork), wrap sandwiches (grilled shrimp for one example), Asian (including pot stickers and Vietnamese noodles), decent NY pizza, plump Chicago hot dogs, peel-and-eat shrimp and lobster chowder, a bargain-priced build-your-own salad bar, plus pastries and even wine. You get a card when you enter, and it's swiped whenever you choose something, and then you pay the one price after you eat (on real plates with real napkins and forks). It's slightly more convenient than the traditional pay-as-you-go food court, certainly more efficient than a cafeteria, and a better value (especially given how large the portions are) than many a buffet. And with the range of food, an entire family with very different tastes will all find something satisfactory.

In Caesars Palace, 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/731-7110.** Most items under $15. AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm.

Stage Deli ✪✪ DELI New York City's Stage Deli—a legendary hangout for comedians, athletes, and politicians—has been slapping pastrami on rye for more than half a century. Its Las Vegas branch retains the Stage's brightly lit, Big Apple essence. Walls are embellished with subway graffiti and hung with Broadway theater posters, bowls of pickles grace the white Formica tables, and, in the New York tradition, celebrities drop by whenever they're in town.

Most of the fare—including fresh-baked pumpernickel and rye, meats, chewy bagels, lox, spicy deli mustard, and pickles—comes in daily from New York. The Stage dishes up authentic 5-inch-high sandwiches stuffed with pastrami, corned beef, brisket, or chopped liver. Maybe "overstuffed" is a better description. Unless you have a hearty appetite, are feeding two, or have a fridge in your room for leftovers, you might want to try the half sandwich and soup or salad combos. Other specialties here include matzo ball soup, knishes, kasha varnishkes, cheese blintzes, kreplach, pirogen, and smoked fish platters accompanied by bagels and cream cheese. Or you might prefer a full meal consisting of pot roast and gravy, salad, homemade dinner rolls, potato pancakes, and fresh vegetables. Desserts run the gamut from rugelach cheesecake to Hungarian-style apple strudel.

In the Forum Shops at Caesars Palace, 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/893-4045.** Reservations accepted for large parties only. Main courses $10–$14; sandwiches $6–$14. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 8am–11pm; Fri–Sat 8am–midnight (takeout stays open 30 min. later).

3 North Strip

VERY EXPENSIVE

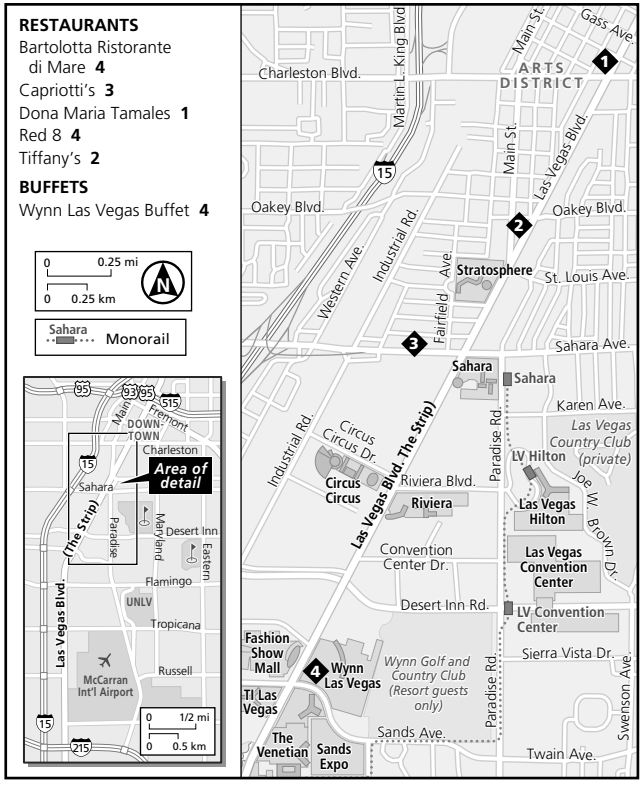
Bartolotta Ristorante di Mare ✪✪✪ ITALIAN/SEAFOOD James Beard Foundation Award–winning chef Paul Bartolotta trained in Italy under master chefs before opening up his highly acclaimed Spiaggia in Chicago. Now he's at Wynn Las Vegas, in this eponymous kitchen, yet more proof that celebrity chefs are all very well and good, but it's not the same as having them on the premises. In this case, the result is as authentic Italian food as one can find outside Italy—and the restaurant we are currently most likely to tout in Vegas.

You can choose your whole cooked fish right from that day's batch (you can get them big enough so one can be split among several people), which may include new-to-you (they were to us) possibilities such as Orata and purple snapper, each topped with a chunky "sauce" of sweet pachino tomatoes, arugula, garlic, and red onion. Pastas are perfect as well, especially the delicate sheep's milk ricotta handkerchief-style ravioli. Seared scallops with porcini mushrooms in browned butter are what scallops should be—and all because this Italian staff learned their lessons well and they are passing that knowledge on to you. The space itself is perhaps the nicest in the hotel, and there's outdoor cabana seating by a small pond filled with reflecting balls, perfect for a long (as the Italians like to do it), sultry evening meal. A jewel box of a place for cooking that is a treasure.

3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (in Wynn Las Vegas hotel). ✆ **888/320-7110** or 702/770-9966. www.wynnlasvegas.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses dinner $25–$42. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 5:30–10:30pm.

MODERATE

Red 8 ✪✪ ASIAN Such a relief, in the otherwise pricey Wynn, to find a dining spot that is both good and affordable. This visual standout is a small cafe—as you wander by, you think "Cool! Some of the tables overlook the casino!" Then you realize those are *all* of the tables—with a decor that screams the place's colorful name. It's popular, given the location, size, and pricing—and the quality of the food. Covering a sort of Pan-Asiatic (Southeast Asia, anyway) terrain, look for noodle dishes both wet (soup) and dry (pan-fried), rice (including porridge), dim sum, Korean barbecue, Mongolian beef, vegetarian options, and more. There are some "market price"



specials that can quadruple a bill pretty fast, but otherwise, this is a more budget-friendly option.

3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (in Wynn Las Vegas). ✆ **702/770-3380.** Main courses $14–$20. AE, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11am–11pm; Fri–Sat 11am–midnight.

INEXPENSIVE

Capriotti's ★★★ *Finds* SANDWICHES It looks like a dump, but there's a reason that Capriotti's is one of the fastest-growing businesses in town. They roast their own beef and turkeys on the premises and stuff them (or Italian cold cuts, or whatever) into sandwiches mislabeled "small," "medium," and "large"—the latter clocks in at 20 inches, easily feeding two for under $10 total. And deliciously so; the "Bobby" (turkey, dressing, and cranberry sauce,

Finds Worth a Trip

A true foodie in Las Vegas should make a point of finding the nearest moving vehicle that can get them to **Rosemary's Restaurant** ★★★, 8125 W. Sahara (✆ **702/869-2251;** www.rosemarysrestaurant.com). A 15-minute (or so) drive west on Sahara (hardly anything) is all it takes to eat what may well be the best food in town. The brainchild of Michael and Wendy Jordan, both veterans of the New Orleans food scene, Rosemary's Restaurant shows more than a few NOLA touches, from the food to the service, in a room that's warmer and more inviting than most others in Vegas.

The cuisine covers most regions of the U.S., though Southern influences dominate, and 50 local farmers help supply products. Interesting sides include ultra-rich blue-cheese slaw, and perfect cornmeal jalapeño hush puppies. A recent visit found the crispy striped bass fighting it out with the pan-seared honey-glazed salmon for "best fish dish I've ever had." Desserts are similarly Southern—lemon icebox pie!—and most pleasant. There is a nice little wine list with a broad range, and they also specialize, unusually, in beer suggestions to pair with courses, including some fruity Belgian numbers—a rare treat.

The restaurant is open Monday through Friday from 11:30am to 2:30pm for lunch and nightly from 5:30 to 10:30pm for dinner. Main courses at lunch run $12 to $16; at dinner they're $18 to $29. Major credit cards are accepted and reservations are strongly suggested.

like Thanksgiving dinner in sandwich form) would be our favorite sandwich in the world had we not tried their "Slaw B Joe"—roast beef, coleslaw, and Russian dressing. They even have veggie varieties. When we say Vegas needs more true budget fare, with both taste and a mom-and-pop background (as opposed to a generic chain), we mean places like Capriotti's. We never leave town without a stop here, and you shouldn't, either.

322 W. Sahara Ave. (at Las Vegas Blvd. S.). ✆ **702/474-0229.** www.capriottis.com. Most sandwiches under $10. No credit cards. Mon–Fri 10am–5pm; Sat 11am–5pm.

Dona Maria Tamales ★★ MEXICAN Decorated with Tijuana-style quiltwork and calendars, this is your quintessential Mexican diner, convenient to both the north end of the Strip and Downtown. They use lots of lard, lots of cheese, and lots of sauce. As a result, the food is really good—and really fattening. Yep, the folks who did those health reports showing how bad Mexican food can be for your heart probably did some research here. That just makes it all the better, in our opinion. Locals apparently agree; even at lunchtime the place is crowded.

910 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (at Charleston Blvd.). ✆ **702/382-6538.** www.donamariatamales.com. Main courses $5.50–$8 breakfast, $6–$13 lunch or dinner. AE, MC, V. Mon–Fri 8am–10pm; Sat–Sun 8am–11pm.

Tiffany's ★★ *Value* DINER Why bother with theme restaurants that pretend to be cheap diners when the real thing is just past the end of the Strip? This decidedly unflashy soda fountain/lunch counter was Las Vegas's first 24-hour restaurant, and it has been going strong for 60 years. Plunk down at the counter and watch the cooks go nuts trying to keep up with the orders. The menu is basic comfort food: standard items (meatloaf, ground round steak, chops, and so on), fluffy cream pies, and classic breakfasts served anytime—try the biscuits and cream gravy at 3am. But the best bet is a ⅓-pound burger and "thick, creamy shake," both about as good as they get. At around $6, this is half what you would pay for a comparable meal at the Hard Rock Cafe. Places like this are a vanishing species, but note that the neighborhood remains stubbornly rough in appearance, and that can be a turnoff. Stay alert if you come here at night.

1700 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (at East Oakey Blvd.). ✆ **702/444-4459.** Reservations not accepted. Most items under $8. No credit cards. Daily 24 hr.

4 East of the Strip

In this section, we cover restaurants close by the Convention Center, along with those farther south on Paradise Road, Flamingo Road, and Tropicana Avenue.

VERY EXPENSIVE

Lawry's The Prime Rib ★★★ STEAK/SEAFOOD If you love prime rib, come here. If you could take or leave prime rib, Lawry's will turn you into a believer, because Lawry's does one thing, and it does it better than anyone else. Yes, you can get prime rib all over town for under $5. But, to mix a food metaphor, that's a tuna fish sandwich when you can have caviar at Lawry's.

Eating at Lawry's is a ceremony, with all the parts played the same way for the last 60 years. You tell the waitress what side dishes you might want (sublime creamed spinach, baked potato, and so on) for an extra price. Later, she returns with a spinning salad bowl (think of salad preparation as a Busby Berkeley musical number). The bowl, resting on crushed ice, spins as she pours Lawry's special dressing in a stream from high over her head. Tomatoes garnish. Applause follows. Eventually, giant metal carving carts come to your table, bearing the meat. You name your cut (the regular Lawry's, the extra-large Diamond Jim Brady for serious carnivores, and the wimpy thin English cut), and specify how you'd like it cooked. It comes with terrific Yorkshire pudding, nicely browned and not soggy, and some creamed horseradish that is combined with fluffy whipped cream, simultaneously sweet and tart.

Flavorful, tender, perfectly cooked, and lightly seasoned, this will be the best prime rib you will ever have. Okay, maybe that's going too far, but the rest is accurate, honest. It just has to be tasted to be believed. You can finish off with a rich dessert (English trifle is highly recommended), but it almost seems pointless.

4043 Howard Hughes Pkwy. (at Flamingo Rd., between Paradise Rd. and Koval Lane). ✆ **702/893-2223.** www.lawrysonline.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses $29–$44. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 5–10pm; Fri–Sat 5–11pm.

Pamplemousse ✪ FRENCH A little bit off the beaten path, Pamplemousse is a long-established Vegas restaurant that shouldn't be overlooked in the crush of new high-profile eateries. The menu, which changes nightly, is recited by your waiter. The meal always begins with a large complimentary basket of crudités (about 10 different crisp, fresh vegetables), a big bowl of olives, and, in a nice country touch, a basket of hard-boiled eggs. Recent menu offerings have included out-of-this-world soups (such as French onion), and appetizers such as shrimp in cognac cream sauce. Recommended entrees include a sterling veal with mushrooms and a Dijon sauce, and an even better rack of lamb with a pistachio nut crust and a rosemary cream sauce (all sauces, by the way, are made with whatever the chef has on hand that evening in the kitchen). That's not to mention fabulous desserts such as homemade ice cream in a hard chocolate shell.

400 E. Sahara Ave. (between Santa Paula and Santa Rita., just east of Paradise Rd.). ✆ **702/733-2066.** www.pamplemousserestaurant.com. Reservations required. Main courses $19–$32. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 5:30–10:30pm, last seating at 9:15pm.

RESTAURANTS

Bougainvillea **6**
Carluccio's Tivoli Gardens **10**
Einstein Bros. Bagels **9**
Kabuki **7**
Lawry's The Prime Rib **5**
Lotus of Siam **2**
Memphis Championship Barbecue **12**
Pamplemousse **1**
Paymon's Mediterranean Cafe & Lounge **8**
Shalimar **4**
Toto's **11**

BUFFETS

The Buffet at the Las Vegas Hilton **3**

MODERATE

Carluccio's Tivoli Gardens ✪ *Finds* ITALIAN A bit of a drive, but well worth it for those seeking an authentic (read: dining in a restaurant that's been around more than 10 years) Vegas experience. This joint used to be owned by none other than the Rhinestone King himself, Liberace. See, it's formerly Liberace's Tivoli Gardens, and he designed the interior himself, so you know what that looks like. This kind of history is more and more rare in this town with no memory, plus it's right next door to the Liberace Museum, no coincidence, so go pay your giggling respects in the late afternoon and then stop here for dinner. Expect traditional Italian food (pasta, pasta, pasta, and scampi), but done very, very well.

1775 E. Tropicana Blvd. (at Spencer St.). ✆ **702/795-3236.** Reservations recommended. Main courses $8–$18. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Tues–Sun 4:30–10pm.

Kabuki ✪ JAPANESE Primarily catering to a Japanese clientele, Kabuki is a real taste of Japan. Rice paper covers the windows of this tastefully converted diner, while various paintings of Japanese kabuki actors grace the walls. The service is excellent, starting your meal off with a warm towel and green tea. Yes, they do have a small sushi bar, but the locals (who often vote this their favorite Japanese restaurant in the *Las Vegas Review Journal* poll) come back for the other Japanese dishes. *Negi ma,* a teriyaki-marinated beef rolled with onions, and *yaki gyoza* (pot stickers) are both amazing starters. For the main course, try *zarusoba* (cold Japanese buckwheat noodles), beef and chicken teriyaki, or *tatsuta age* (marinated fried chicken). They have plenty of sushi specials, including yellowtail, shrimp, and calamari, but there are other sushi places in town that do sushi better (admittedly, in some cases, for a higher price).

3949 S. Maryland Pkwy. (north of Flamingo Rd.). ✆ **702/733-0066.** Reservations required weekend nights. Main courses $7–$17. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Sat 11:30am–2pm and 5:30–11pm.

Memphis Championship Barbecue ✪✪ BARBECUE Okay, we refuse, simply refuse, to get into the debate about Texas vs. Kansas City vs. Mississippi barbecue (and if you've got another state with the best dang barbecue, we really don't want to hear about it). But we can say that if you aren't physically in those places, eating at Memphis Championship Barbecue is hardly settling for second best. Its vinegar-based sauce is sweet but has a kick. Food is cooked over mesquite and applewood, and the meat falls off the bone just the way you want it to. Standouts include a pulled-barbecue-chicken sandwich, onion straws, and delicious mac and cheese. ***Note this***

special: A $60 feast includes a rack of baby back ribs, three-quarters of a pork shoulder, ¾ pound of beef brisket, ½ pound of hot links, a whole chicken, baked beans, coleslaw, rolls, cream corn, and fries. It feeds four; we think even if two of those four are teenage boys, you might have leftovers.

2250 E. Warm Springs Rd. (near 215 Fwy.). ✆ **702/260-6909.** www.memphis-bbq.com. Entrees $9–$20; special barbecue dinner for 4 people $60. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11am–10pm; Fri–Sat 11am–10:30pm.

Shalimar INDIAN In a town full of buffet deals, it's hard to get excited about another one, but on the other hand, all those other buffet deals offer pretty much identical food: carving stations, various cafeteria hot dishes, and so forth. Here at Shalimar, a lunch buffet means about two-dozen different North Indian–style dishes, all for about $7.50. It's not as colorful or huge (in fact, it's just a table covered with steam trays) as those buffets up the street, but it is far more interesting. It's also a great deal and one of the first places to run to if you're sick of Strip food. One standout at a recent visit was the *bengan bharta* (finely diced eggplant cooked with onions, tomatoes, and spices).

In the Citibank Plaza, 3900 S. Paradise Rd. ✆ **702/796-0302.** Reservations recommended. Lunch buffet $7.50; main courses $11–$16 at dinner. AE, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Fri 11am–2pm; daily 5–10pm.

INEXPENSIVE

Bougainvillea ★★ *Value* DINER Oh, how we love a Vegas coffee shop. You've got your all-day breakfasts, your graveyard-shift specials, your prime rib, and, of course, your full Chinese menu. And it's all hearty and well priced; we're talkin' build your own three-egg, three-ingredient omelet for around $5. You can get a full dinner entree or a nice light lunch of a large half-sandwich and soup, also for around $5. And 24-hour specials, which include a slab of meat, plus potato or rice, veggies, soup or salad, and a 12-ounce draft beer, run between $8 and $13. Yep. That's the ticket.

In Terrible's, 4100 Paradise Rd. ✆ **702/733-7000.** Entrees $5–$13. AE, MC, V. Daily 24 hr.

Einstein Bros. Bagels ★ BAGELS You may not like digging into an enormous buffet first thing in the morning, and the continental breakfast in most hotels is a rip-off. A welcome alternative is a fresh-baked bagel, of which there are 15 varieties here—everything from onion to wild blueberry. Cream cheeses also come in many flavors, anything from sun-dried tomato to vegetable and jalapeño. Einstein's is a pleasant place for a morning meal, with both indoor

seating and outdoor tables cooled by misters. Service is friendly, and four special-blend coffees are available each day.

Note: Bagel buffs might also want to check out the nearby **Bagelmania** at 855 E. Twain Ave. (✆ **702/369-3322**). The bagels are sometimes chilled for freshness, which is heresy, but you can avoid this problem by catching them early in the morning, when their extensive selection is hot and fresh.

In the University Gardens Shopping Center, 4626 S. Maryland Pkwy. (between Harmon and Tropicana aves.). ✆ **702/795-7800.** www.einsteinbros.com. All items under $6. MC, V. Mon–Fri 6am–6pm; Sat 6am–5pm; Sun 6am–4pm.

Lotus of Siam ★★★ *Finds* THAI So we drag you out to a strip mall in the east end of nowhere and you wonder why? Because here is what critic Jonathan Gold of *Gourmet* magazine called no less than the best Thai restaurant in North America.

In addition to all the usual beloved Thai favorites, they have a separate menu featuring lesser-known dishes from northern Thailand—they don't routinely hand this one out (most of the customers are there for the more pedestrian, if still excellent, $9 lunch buffet). The owner drives at least twice a week back to Los Angeles to pick up the freshest herbs and other ingredients needed for his dishes' authenticity. That's dedication that should be rewarded with superlatives.

You might be best off letting them know you are interested in Northern food (with dried chiles and more pork, it's not un-Cajun-like, says the owner) and letting them guide you through, though you must assure them that you aren't of faint heart or palate (some customers complain the heat isn't enough, even with "well spiced" dishes, though others find even medium spice sufficient). Standouts include the Issan sausage (a grilled sour pork number); jackfruit *larb* (spicy ground meat); and *sua rong hai* ("weeping tiger"), a dish of soft, sliced, and grilled marinated beef. If you insist on more conventional Thai, that's okay, in that it's unlikely you are going to have better *mee krob* noodles or *tom kah kai* (that beloved soup can also be served northern style, if asked, which is without the coconut milk). If in season, finish with mango with sticky rice, or if not, coconut ice cream with sticky rice, something you would find at many a street stall in Thailand.

In the Commercial Center, 953 E. Sahara Ave. ✆ **702/735-3033.** www.saipinchutima.com. Reservations strongly recommended for dinner. Lunch buffet $9; other dishes $9–$18. AE, MC, V. Mon–Thurs 11:30am–2:30pm and 5:30–9:30pm; Fri–Sun 5:30–10pm.

Paymon's Mediterranean Cafe & Lounge ✪ MEDITERRANEAN The emphasis on safe mainstream food for the masses in Vegas means that the kind of ethnic places chowhound folks brag about discovering in big cities are rare indeed. And when you do find them, they are always, but always, in a strip mall. Paymon's Mediterranean Cafe is no exception, and its main dining room has no decor worth mentioning. But it gets extra points for having a courtyard seating area full of Middle Eastern touches and an honest-to-goodness hookah lounge. Plus, it's just so darn nice to find ethnic food in this town. Kabobs take, the menu warns, 25 minutes, so order an appetizer plate with various dips to while away the time. Hummus is too reminiscent of its chickpea origins, but baba ghanouj is properly smoky, and the falafel has the right crunch. Gyros may not be the most adventurous thing to order, but who cares about that when you've got a well-stuffed pocket of pita, gloppy with sweet yogurt sauce.

4147 S. Maryland Pkwy. (at Flamingo Rd., in the Tiffany Sq. strip mall). ✆ **702/731-6030.** www.paymons.com. Reservations not accepted. Main courses $10–$19; most sandwiches under $8. AE, DISC, MC, V. Restaurant Sun–Thurs 11am–1am, Fri–Sat 11am–2am; lounge Mon–Thurs 5pm–1am, Fri–Sat 5pm–3am.

Toto's ✪✪ *Value* *Kids* MEXICAN A family-style Mexican restaurant favored by locals, with enormous portions and quick service, this is good value for your money. With all that food, you could probably split portions and still be satisfied. There are no surprises on the menu, though there are quite a few seafood dishes. Everything is quite tasty, and they don't skimp on the cheese. The nongreasy chips come with fresh salsa, and the nachos are terrific. Chicken tamales got a thumbs-up, while the veggie burrito was happily received by non–meat eaters. The operative word here is *huge;* the burritos are almost the size of your arm. The generous portions continue with dessert—a piece of flan was practically pie size. The Sunday margarita brunch is quite fun, and the drinks are large (naturally) and yummy.

2055 E. Tropicana Ave. ✆ **702/895-7923.** Main courses $7–$15. AE, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Thurs 11am–10pm; Fri–Sat 11am–11pm; Sun 9:30am–10pm.

5 Downtown

VERY EXPENSIVE

Andre's ✪✪ FRENCH Andre's has long been the bastion of gourmet dining in Vegas, but with all the new big boys crowding the Strip, it runs the risk of getting overlooked. It shouldn't—Andre may not have a show on the Food Network, but he ought to be a household name. Besides, his first restaurant—a celebrity

haunt—still dominates Downtown. In a small, converted 1930s house, you find an elegant French provincial atmosphere, overseen by owner-chef Andre, who brings over 40 years of experience to the table. Much of the waitstaff is also French, and they will happily lavish attention on you and guide you through the menu.

The food presentation is exquisite, and choices change seasonally. On a recent visit, an appetizer of Northwest smoked salmon *mille feuille* with cucumber salad and sevruga caviar was especially enjoyed, as was a main course of grilled Provini veal tornados with chive sauce accompanied by a mushroom and foie gras crepe. You get the idea. Desserts are similarly lovely, an exotic array of rich delights. An extensive wine list (more than 900 labels) is international in scope and includes many rare vintages; consult the sommelier.

Note: An additional branch of Andre's is in the **Monte Carlo Hotel & Casino,** 3775 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (✆ **702/798-7151**), and is also highly recommended, as is their slightly different take, **Alizé** (p. 70), in the Palms.

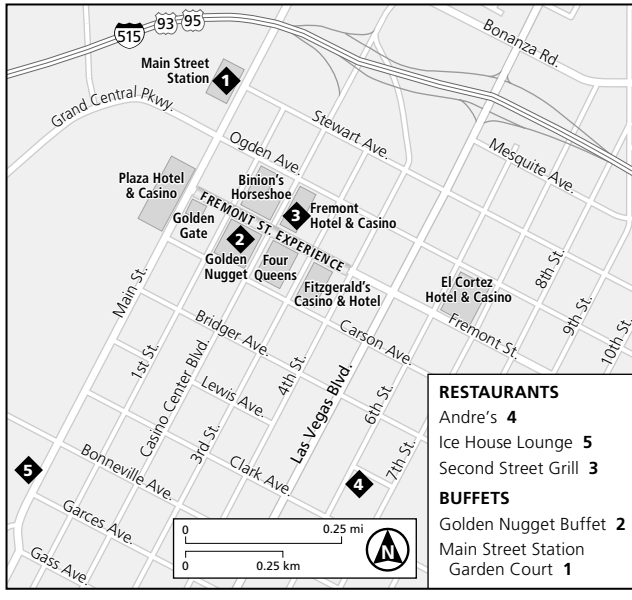
401 S. 6th St. (at Lewis St., 3 blocks south of Fremont St.). ✆ **702/385-5016.** www.andrelv.com. Reservations required. Main courses $28–$65. AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Sat 6–10:30pm.

EXPENSIVE

Second Street Grill ★ *Finds* INTERNATIONAL/PACIFIC RIM

Actually, that description above notwithstanding, they call themselves "Continental American with Euro and Asian influences." And, yes, that translates to a bit of a muddle, culinary-wise, but the portions are extremely generous (a relief in this era of dainty food), and it's hard to resist a place that plants two long potato chips in a pile of mashed potatoes, thereby creating a bunny rabbit. You are probably best off with grill dishes (various steaks and other cuts of meat), though here might be your best ratio of quality to price for lobster tail. Play around with the Hunan pork and beef lettuce wrap appetizers, and the Peking duck and shrimp tacos—don't wince, the shell was a won ton wrapper. The waist-conscious will be very pleased with the bamboo-steamed snapper in a nice broth, while others may want to try the grilled salmon with goat cheese Parmesan crust. Desserts are disappointing, unfortunately. Overall, a nice place for a family-event dinner Downtown, and certainly more affordable than fancy places on the Strip.

In Fremont Hotel & Casino, 200 E. Fremont St. ✆ **702/385-3232.** Reservations recommended. Main courses $17–$30. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Mon and Thurs 6–10pm; Fri–Sat 6–11pm.



INEXPENSIVE

Ice House Lounge ★ *Value* AMERICAN This eatery, part night-club/bar, part diner, believes a Downtown revitalization is still possible, which is why the owners set up shop in a particularly grungy industrial part of the city. Don't let the dismal surroundings put you off; inside is a lively, popular modern-appearing club, with a menu full of, if not inspired, certainly reliable and well-priced menu options. The late-night hours also make this a good choice for those located near Downtown. Lunch, in particular, is a bargain, as vinyl-record-size plates are loaded with towering sandwiches or wide-reaching flatbread-style pizzas, mounds of coleslaw, or piles of crinkly fries. We like the plate of three miniburgers. The food is all solidly good and, given the portions, eminently shareable. The bar borrows the "ice bar" concept from Red Square, while the walls feature historical photos of Vegas and of the actual icehouse that once stood on the site.

650 S. Main St. (at Bonneville). ✆ **702/315-2570.** www.icehouselounge.com. Most items under $15. AE, MC, V. Mon–Fri 10am–2am; Sat 11am–2am.

6 Buffets & Sunday Brunches

Lavish, low-priced buffets are a Las Vegas tradition, designed to lure you to the gaming tables, and to make you feel that you got such a bargain for your meal you can afford to drop more money. They're a gimmick, and we love them. Something about filling up on too much prime rib and shrimp just says "Vegas" to us. Of course, there is quite a range. Some are just perfunctory steam-table displays and salad bars that are heavy on the iceberg lettuce, while others are unbelievably opulent spreads with caviar and free-flowing champagne. Some are quite beautifully presented, as well. Some of the food is awful, some of it merely works as fuel, and some of it is memorable.

Note: Buffet meals are extremely popular, and reservations are usually not taken (we've indicated when they are accepted, and in all those cases, they are highly recommended). Arrive early (before opening) or late to avoid a long line, especially on weekends.

SOUTH STRIP

EXPENSIVE

Mandalay Bay's Bayside Buffet ✪ BUFFET This is a particularly pretty, not overly large buffet. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the beach part of the elaborate pool area make it less stuffy and eliminate the closed-in feeling that so many of the other buffets in town have. The buffet itself is adequately arranged but features nothing particularly special, though there are some nice salads, hearty meats, and a larger and better-than-average dessert bar.

In Mandalay Bay, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/632-7777.** Breakfast $16; lunch $20; dinner $27; Sun brunch $24; Shark Reef Brunch package $36. Children under 3 eat free. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Fri 7am–2:30pm and 5–10pm; Sat–Sun 7am–10pm.

MGM Grand Buffet BUFFET This rather average buffet does feature a fresh Belgian waffle station at breakfast. Dinner also has an all-you-can-eat shrimp and prime rib option. Also available: low-fat, sugar-free desserts! And at all meals, you get a full pot of coffee on your table. Still, those dinner prices do not justify a trip here.

In MGM Grand, 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/891-7315.** Breakfast $14; lunch $15; Sun–Thurs dinner $26, Fri–Sat dinner $28; Sat–Sun brunch $21. Reduced prices for children under 12, free for children under 4. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 7am–2:30pm; Sun–Thurs 4:30–10pm; Fri–Sat 4:30–10:30pm.

MODERATE

MORE, The Buffet at Luxor ✪✪ BUFFET Once one of our favorite buffets not just for the excellent price-to-quality ratio, but

also because it reflected the excellent theme in its Indiana Jones–invoking decor, the Luxor buffet has been redesigned and renamed as part of the ongoing de-Egypt-ing of the hotel. Dang. We are sick of neato modern classy already and want our mummies back. That said, the food is the best in its price range, and it is one of the top buffets in town. There's a Mexican station with some genuinely spicy food, a Chinese stir-fry station, and different Italian pastas. Desserts were disappointing, though they do offer a pretty large selection of diabetic-friendly options. The quality-to-price ratio is no secret, and, as a result, the lines are always enormous.

In Luxor, 3900 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/262-4000.** Breakfast $12; lunch $14; dinner $20; Sun brunch $18. Reduced prices for children under 11; free for children under 4. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

Spice Market Buffet ★★ Despite the switch over from Aladdin to Planet Hollywood, there are no plans to reconfigure this excellent buffet. This comes as a relief, as this is one of the better choices in the city, thanks to pretty good Middle Eastern specialties, including the occasional Moroccan entrees. Look for tandoori chicken, hummus, couscous, stuffed tomatoes with ground lamb, and at dinner, lamb skewers. The Mexican station is particularly good as well, and the dim sum also gets a vote of confidence. There is cotton candy at lunch and a crepe-making station at dinner. We still wish it were a bit cheaper; at these prices, it's edging toward the high end.

3667 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/785-5555.** Breakfast $13.99; lunch $16.99; dinner $24.99. AE, MC, V. Daily 7–10:30am, 11am–3pm, and 4–10pm.

INEXPENSIVE

Excalibur's Roundtable Buffet ★ BUFFET This one strikes the perfect balance of moderate prices, forgettable decor (dang it, they don't have the full-on King Arthur theme going anymore), and adequate food. It's what you want in a cheap Vegas buffet—except it's just not that cheap anymore. Then again, none are anymore, so this still qualifies and, thus, usually has long lines.

In Excalibur, 3850 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/597-7777.** Breakfast $11; lunch $13; dinner $16; Sun brunch $15. Prices reduced for children 12 and younger. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 6:30am–11pm.

Monte Carlo Buffet ★ BUFFET A "courtyard" under a painted sky, the Monte Carlo's buffet room has a Moroccan market theme, with murals of Arab scenes, Moorish archways, Oriental carpets, and walls hung with photographs of and artifacts from Morocco. Dinner includes a rotisserie (for chicken and pork loin, or London broil), a Chinese food station, a taco/fajita bar, a baked potato bar,

numerous salads, and more than a dozen desserts, plus frozen yogurt and ice-cream machines. Lunches are similar. At breakfast, the expected fare is supplemented by an omelet station. Fresh-baked bagels are a plus.

In Monte Carlo Resort & Casino, 3770 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/730-7777.** Breakfast $9; lunch $10; dinner $14 (all include tax). AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

MID-STRIP

VERY EXPENSIVE

Bally's Sterling Sunday Brunch ★★ BUFFET Now, the admittedly high cost of this brunch seems antithetical to the original purpose of a buffet, which was a lot of food for minimal money. However, if you're a dedicated buffet fan, this is probably a better spree than one of the many new high-priced restaurants. It works out to less money in the long run, and you will get, for your purposes, more bang for your buck. It's a fancy deal—linen and silver-bedecked tables, waiters to assist you if you choose—and while the variety of food isn't as massive as at regular buffets, the quality is much higher in terms of both content and execution. We're talking unlimited champagne, broiled lobster, caviar, sushi, and rotating dishes of the day (monkfish with pomegranate essence, tenderloin wrapped in porcini mushroom mousse, or even ostrich). No French toast that's been sitting out for days here! Perfect for a wedding breakfast or business brunch or just a big treat; stay a long time and eat as much as you can.

Inside Bally's Steakhouse, 3645 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/967-7999.** Reservations recommended. Brunch $65. AE, DC, MC, V. Sun 9:30am–2pm (last reservation at 1:30pm).

Bellagio Buffet ★★ BUFFET Though even pricier than its counterpart over at The Mirage, the Bellagio buffet gets nearly as high marks. The array of foods is fabulous, with one ethnic cuisine after another (Japanese, Chinese dim sum, build-it-yourself Mexican items, and so on). There are elaborate pastas and semitraditional Italian-style pizza from a wood-fired oven. The cold fish appetizers at each end of the line are not to be missed—scallops, smoked salmon, crab claws, shrimp, oysters, and assorted condiments. Specialties include breast of duck and game hens. There is no carving station, but you can get the meat pre-carved. The salad bar is more ordinary, though prepared salads have some fine surprises, such as eggplant tofu and an exceptional Chinese chicken salad. Desserts, unfortunately, look better than they actually are.

In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **877/234-6358.** Mon–Fri breakfast $15; Sat–Sun brunch $23–$29; Mon–Fri lunch $20; Sun–Thurs dinner $28, Fri–Sat dinner $36. Children under 3 eat free. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Breakfast Mon–Fri 7–11am; lunch Mon–Fri 11am–4pm; dinner daily 4–10pm; brunch Sat–Sun 7am–4pm.

EXPENSIVE

Paris, Le Village Buffet ★★★ BUFFET The Paris buffet is housed in the most pleasing room of the buffet bunch. It's a Disneyland-esque two-thirds replica of your classic French village clichés; it's either a charming respite from Vegas lights or it's sickening, depending on your tolerance level for such things. Buffet stations are grouped according to French regions and includes dishes (ranging from crepes to quiche to braised beef) from Brittany, Normandy, Burgundy, the Alsace, and Provence. The salad station isn't strong on flavors, but the veggies are fresh, and there is even some domestic (darn it) cheese.

In Paris Las Vegas, 3655 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **888/266-5687.** Breakfast $14; lunch $18; dinner $25; Sun brunch $25. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 7am–10pm; Fri–Sat 7am–11pm.

Mirage Cravings Buffet ★★ BUFFET Aesthetically, an incredible transformation from classic Vegas buffet (read: blah) style to a gleaming, streamlined look, all shining steel and up-to-the-minute high-design concept shades of green, blue, and red. Gone are the heaping mounds of shrimp and other symbols of Vegas excess and bargain. In its place are plenty of live-action stations, but minimal offerings, just a scant few in the (admittedly inclusive) categories. This probably helps with waste, but if you are used to matters the other way, it does feel mingy. Seniors won't like the poor signage; kids may get tired long before completing the lengthy circuit. No worries: The line starts with excellent pizza. Look for pot stickers and Chinese barbecue pork, quite good barbecue, tangy Japanese cuke salad, and slightly dry but flavorful Mexican slow-roasted pork. A trip to the made-to-order salad station is so pokey, you'll need to find the other salads that are hidden with the open-faced sandwiches (where you can also find gefilte fish). The desserts are generally disappointing. Despite the drawbacks, this remains popular with buffet connoisseurs.

In The Mirage, 3400 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/791-7111.** Breakfast $13; lunch $18; dinner $23; Sat–Sun brunch $21. Reduced prices for children ages 5–10, free for children under 5. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 7–10pm.

Rio's Carnival World Buffet ★★ BUFFET This buffet has long been voted, by locals, as the best in Vegas. Quality-wise, it's

probably as good as ever, and maybe even better. Decor-wise, it's better still, since an overhaul was devoted mostly to improving the dining areas. Overall, this is simply more mainstream, an upscale food court with "South American" cooked-to-order stir-fries, Mexican taco fixings and accompaniments, Chinese fare, a Japanese sushi bar and teppanyaki grill, a Brazilian mixed grill, Italian pasta and antipasto, and fish and chips. There's even a diner setup for hot dogs, burgers, fries, and milkshakes. All this is in addition to the usual offerings of most Las Vegas buffets. Best of all, a brand-new dessert station features at least 70 kinds of pies, cakes, and pastries from an award-winning pastry chef.

In Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino, 3700 W. Flamingo Rd. ✆ **702/252-7777.** Breakfast $14; lunch $17; dinner $24; Sat–Sun champagne brunch $24. AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Fri 7am–10pm; Sat–Sun 7:30am–10pm.

MODERATE

The Buffet at TI ★★ BUFFET Another gorgeous buffet makeover, now easily the handsomest buffet space in town, sort of contemporary diner, all dark gleaming wood, mirrors, and geometric lines. We feel mixed on the food choices; while there is a reasonable range of cuisines (Italian; Japanese, with sushi chefs who will make up fresh plates just for you; Southern; deli), there isn't the overwhelming bounty we've come to consider our right when it comes to Vegas buffets. However, there are some well-considered and fine-tasting deli sandwiches (brie and honey, roast beef with goat cheese), plus better-than-decent barbecue ribs and Chinese options. Best of all, some of the most charming dessert choices, focusing on such childhood tastes as cupcakes, fresh cotton candy, and best of all, adorable minidoughnuts, fresh out of the fryer. Lunch is reasonably priced enough that it would be a good choice just for a light selection of savories and serious gorging on dessert.

In TI–Treasure Island, 3300 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/894-7111.** Breakfast $12; lunch $15; dinner Sun–Thurs $20, Fri–Sat $26; Sat–Sun champagne brunch $15. Reduced prices for children ages 4–12; free for children 3 and under. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 7am–10:30pm.

Flamingo Paradise Garden Buffet ★ BUFFET This buffet occupies a vast room, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a verdant tropical landscape of cascading waterfalls and koi ponds. At dinner, there is an extensive international food station (which changes monthly), presenting French, Chinese, Mexican, German, or Italian specialties. A large salad bar, fresh fruits, pastas, vegetables, potato dishes, and a vast dessert display round out the offerings.

Lunch is similar, featuring international cuisines as well as a stir-fry station and a soup/salad/pasta bar. At breakfast, you'll find all the expected fare, including a made-to-order omelet station and fresh-baked breads. The seafood is dry and tough, and desserts are uninspired. Drinks are unlimited but are served in small glasses, so expect to call your server for many refills.

In The Flamingo Las Vegas, 3555 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/733-3111.** Mon–Fri brunch $14; Sat–Sun champagne brunch $16; dinner $19. Prices may be higher on holidays. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Brunch daily 7:30am–3pm; dinner daily 4–10pm.

Flavors at Harrah's ✪ BUFFET Not as bold a makeover as other recently refurbished buffets, but the redone room is certainly an improvement. Oddly, here it's the carving station that stands out, with simultaneous servings of turkey, ham, prime rib, chicken, game hen, sausage, roast vegetables (talk about a wild card), and lamb. The other stations are typical—Mexican, Italian, seafood, Chinese. A particularly good dessert area is heavy on the cookies, cakes, and little pastries such as Oreo mousse tarts and mini crème brûlées. Best of all, there is a chocolate fountain with pound cake, fruit, brownies, and the like ready for dipping. It nearly overshadows the make-your-own root beer float station.

In Harrah's, 3475 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/369-5000.** Breakfast $13.99; lunch $16.99; dinner $21.99. AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

NORTH STRIP

VERY EXPENSIVE

Wynn Las Vegas Buffet ✪✪✪ BUFFET Goodness, we do love a nice buffet, and this sparkling new one is particularly nice (if notably expensive), more thoughtful and artful than the average. You may get the impression that instead of the usual bunch of often gloppy dishes, someone's thinking about items not just with flavor but that can sit for periods of time better than the usual buffet suspects, or that translate better to large-quantity preparation. Look for such items as jerk chicken, wood-fired pizza, honey-glazed pork, nice little salmon rolls, five kinds of seviche, sweet Kansas City–style barbecue, and tandoori chicken among the stations, which include Mexican, Southern, seafood, and Italian. Best of all, desserts are superior to those at probably all the other buffets, in construction and in taste, giving the impression that a pastry chef is active on the premises. Don't miss the mini floating islands, the unusual tiramisu, the excellent chocolate mousse and ice creams, and even a plate full of madeleines.

In Wynn Las Vegas, 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/770-3463.** Breakfast $18; lunch $22; dinner $34–$38; Sat–Sun brunch $29–$35. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Breakfast Mon–Fri 8–10:30am; lunch Mon–Fri 11:30am–3:30pm; dinner Mon–Thurs 4–10pm, Fri–Sat 4:30–10:30pm, Sun 4:30–10pm; brunch Sat–Sun 8am–3:30pm.

EAST OF THE STRIP

MODERATE

The Buffet at the Las Vegas Hilton ★ BUFFET A surprisingly stylish-looking room, with the usual suspects (salad bar, bagel bar, desserts) and a good selection of Chinese food (including Peking duck). The fare is fresh and delicious, with special mention going to the prime rib, the outstanding cream puffs, and the superior rice pudding. (It's hard to find good desserts at Vegas buffets.) There's plenty to eat here, but the place feels small compared to the newer lavish spreads on the Strip.

In Las Vegas Hilton, 3000 Paradise Rd. ✆ **702/732-5111.** Breakfast $12; lunch $13; dinner $17 (includes complimentary beer and wine); Sat–Sun brunch $17 (includes unlimited champagne). Half-price for children 12 and under. DC, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Fri 7am–2:30pm and 5–10pm; Sat–Sun 8am–2:30pm and 5–10pm.

DOWNTOWN

MODERATE

Golden Nugget Buffet ★★ BUFFET This buffet has often been voted number one in Las Vegas, and it shows how Downtown is one of the last holdouts for bargains; anywhere else in town, this quality of buffet would be at least $2 to $3 more per meal. Most of the seating is in plush booths. The buffet tables are laden with an extensive salad bar (about 50 items), fresh fruit, and marvelous desserts. Fresh seafood is featured every night. Most lavish is the all-day Sunday champagne brunch, which adds such dishes as eggs Benedict, blintzes, pancakes, creamed herring, and smoked fish with bagels and cream cheese.

In the Golden Nugget, 129 E. Fremont St. ✆ **702/385-7111.** Breakfast $9; lunch $10; dinner $17; Sat brunch $16; Sun brunch $17; Fri–Sun Seafood & More Buffet $20. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Fri 7am–10pm; Sat–Sun 8am–10pm.

INEXPENSIVE

Fremont Paradise Buffet ★ BUFFET Another buffet that makes us cross about rising Vegas prices; this was (at dinnertime) one of the cheapest buffets we could recommend, but now? Not so much (seems like every night's a theme night). However, lunchtime still brings a price that is a bargain. The selection isn't extensive (though with some surprises in the form of a "Southwestern" station and some Chinese), but the space is adequately attractive. Expect long lines.

In the Fremont Hotel & Casino, 200 E. Fremont St. ✆ **702/385-3232.** Breakfast $6; lunch $6.50; dinner $10; Sun brunch $10; various "theme" (steak or seafood) nights $13–$16. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Fri 7–10:30am, 11am–3pm, and 4–10pm; Sat–Sun 7am–3pm and 4–10pm.

Main Street Station Garden Court ★★★ *Finds* BUFFET Set in what is truly one of the prettiest buffet spaces in town (and certainly in Downtown), with very high ceilings and tall windows bringing in much-needed natural light, the Main Street Station Garden Court buffet is one of the best in town, let alone Downtown. It features nine live-action stations where you can watch your food being prepared, including a wood-fired, brick-oven pizza (delicious); many fresh salsas at the Mexican station; a barbecue rotisserie; fresh sausage at the carving station; Chinese, Hawaiian, and Southern specialties (soul food and the like); and so many more we lost count. On Friday night, it has all this and nearly infinite varieties of seafood, all the way up to lobster. We ate ourselves into a stupor and didn't regret it.

At Main Street Station, 200 N. Main St. ✆ **702/387-1896.** Breakfast $6; lunch $8; dinner $11–$16; Sat–Sun champagne brunch $10. Free for children 3 and under. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 7–10:30am, 11am–3pm, and 4–10pm.

5

What to See & Do in Las Vegas

You aren't going to lack for things to do in Las Vegas. More than likely, you've come here for the gambling, which should keep you pretty busy (we say that with some understatement). But you can't sit at a slot machine forever. (Or maybe you can.) In any event, it shouldn't be too hard to find ways to fill your time between poker hands.

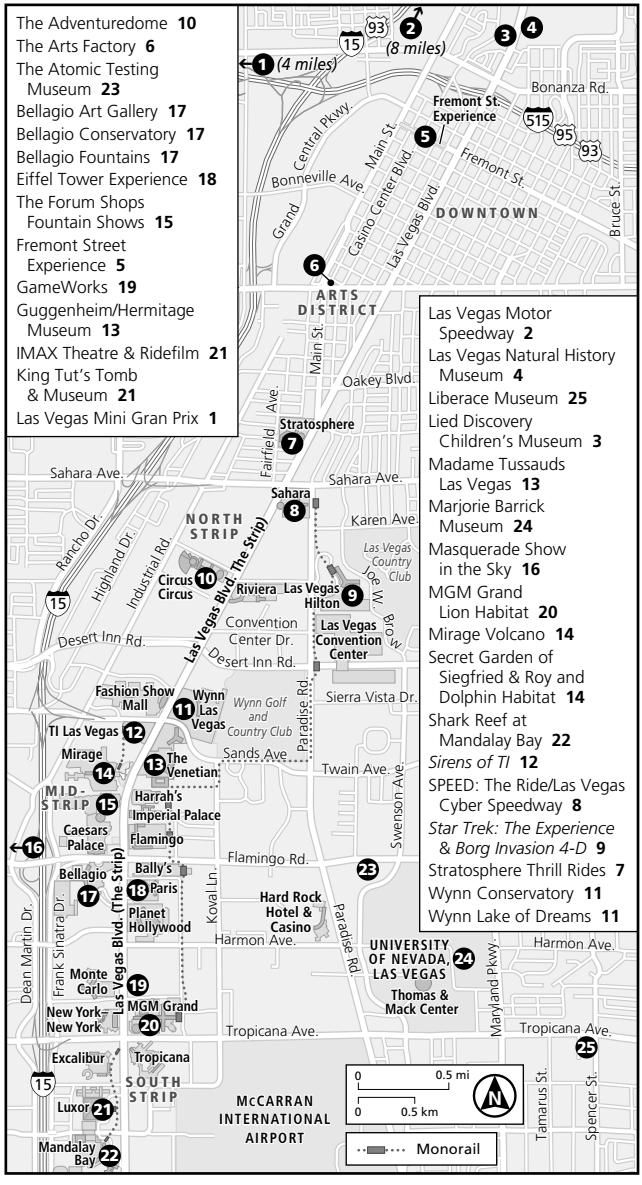
Just walking on the Strip and gazing at the gaudy, garish, absurd wonder of it all can occupy quite a lot of time. This is the number-one activity we recommend in Vegas; at night, it is a mind-boggling sight. And, of course, there are shows and plenty of other nighttime entertainment. But if you need something else to do beyond resting up at your hotel's pool, or if you are trying to amuse yourself while the rest of your party gambles away, this chapter will guide you.

Don't forget to check out the **free hotel attractions,** such as Bellagio's water-fountain ballet, The Mirage's volcano, and the masquerade show at the Rio. Oh, yeah, and the utter piece of hooey that replaced the pirate show at TI–Treasure Island. (The pirates now battle scantily clad women. Except it's even worse than that.) You can probably give that a miss.

1 The Top Attractions

See also the listings for theme parks and other fun stuff in section 3, "Especially for Kids."

The Arts Factory ★★ *Finds* Believe it or not, Las Vegas has a burgeoning art scene (what some would consider soul-crushing is what others consider inspirational), and this complex, located in the Gateway district, is the place to find proof. It features a few galleries and a number of workspaces for local artists. Several of the spaces are closed to the public. On the first Friday of each month, they have a party event (unimaginatively named "First Friday") showcasing local artists and arts-oriented businesses, with live music, street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Las Vegas Blvd. The Strip
Fashion Show Mall
Wynn Las Vegas
Wynn Golf and Country Club
TI Las Vegas
Mirage
The Venetian
MID-STRIP
Harrah's
Imperial Palace
Caesars Palace
Flamingo
Bellagio
Bally's
Paris
Planet Hollywood
Hard Rock Hotel & Casino
Monte Carlo
New York–New York
MGM Grand
Excalibur
Tropicana
SOUTH STRIP
Luxor
Mandalay Bay
McCARRAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT
UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS
Thomas & Mack Center
Monorail
Sahara Ave.
Oakey Blvd.
Karen Ave.
Sierra Vista Dr.
Sands Ave.
Twain Ave.
Flamingo Rd.
Harmon Ave.
Tropicana Ave.
Bonanza Rd.
Fremont St.
Bonneville Ave.
Desert Inn Rd.
Convention Center Dr.
Rancho Dr.
Highland Dr.
Industrial Rd.
Fairfield Ave.
Main St.
Central Pkwy.
Grand
Casino Center Blvd.
Las Vegas Blvd.
Bruce St.
Paradise Rd.
Swenson St.
Koval Ln.
Frank Sinatra Dr.
Dean Martin Dr.
Maryland Pkwy.
Tamarus St.
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performances, and other entertainment and activities. Go to their website for further details.

101–107 E. Charleston Blvd. ✆ **702/676-1111.** www.theartsfactory.com. Free admission. Hours vary by gallery.

The Atomic Testing Museum ★★★ *Finds* From 1951 until 1992, the Nevada Test Site was this country's primary location for testing nuclear weapons. Aboveground blasts in the early days were visible to the tourists and residents of Las Vegas, a mere 65 miles away. This well-executed museum (a Smithsonian affiliate), library, and gallery space offers visitors a fascinating glance at the test site from ancient days through modern times with memorabilia, displays, official documents, videos, interactive displays, motion-simulator theaters (like sitting in a bunker watching a blast), and emotional testimony from the people who worked there. It respectfully treads that tricky line between honoring the work done at the site and understanding its terrible implications. Not to be missed, even if it's only because of the Albert Einstein action figure in the gift shop. Seriously.

755 E. Flamingo Rd. ✆ **702/794-5151.** www.atomictestingmuseum.org. $12 adults; $9 seniors, military, and students with ID; free for children 6 and under. Mon–Sat 9am–5pm; Sun 1–5pm.

Bellagio Art Gallery ★ Everyone—ourselves not nearly least among them—scoffed when then-Bellagio owner Steve Wynn opened an art gallery on his fabulous property. Sure, Wynn's been a serious and respected fine-art collector for years, and consequently there was good stuff on display, but who would go see *art* in Las Vegas? Tons of tourists, as it happens; so many that they had to almost immediately relocate the gallery to a larger space.

When the MGM MIRAGE company bought Wynn's empire, the future of the gallery, which did rely on his collection, was in doubt. Surprise again, you scoffers (and that again includes us). The gallery is not only open again, it's also getting written up by real art critics, thanks in part to such well-chosen shows as Warhol, Monet, and Ansel Adams retrospectives.

Now, will there be as interesting a show when you go? Beats us. (When we wrote this, it was a collection of Picasso's ceramics.) Then there's that ticket price. Do let us point out that the Louvre and the Vatican art collections—both are, needless to say, quite a bit larger and both of which, one can safely say, do have some notable works—cost only about $2 more than the entrance fee to this museum.

In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/693-7871.** www.bgfa.biz. Reservations suggested, but walk-ins taken every 15 min. Admission $15 adults; $12 seniors, students with ID, and Nevada residents. Daily 9am–10pm.

Eiffel Tower Experience *Overrated* Whether this is worth the dough depends on how much you like views. An elevator operator (we refuse to call them guides) delivers a few facts about this Eiffel Tower (this is a half-size exact replica, down to the paint color of the original) during the minute or so ride to the uppermost platform, where you are welcome to stand around and look out for as long as you want, which probably isn't 2 hours, the length of the average movie, which costs about what this does. Nice view, though.

In Paris Las Vegas, 3655 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/946-7000.** Admission daily $9 adults, $7 seniors over 65 and children 6–12, free for children 5 and under. Daily 9:30am–12:30am, weather permitting.

Fremont Street Experience ★★ Poor Downtown. For years now, it's been overlooked in favor of the Strip. And no wonder; it's so . . . small . . . by comparison. Even its once-dazzling collection of hotel marquee lights seems like candles next to the klieg-light voltage of the Strip. Even a $70-million revitalization project hasn't helped give it back its mojo. That's too bad; things are cheaper down here, people, and speaking of people, if you get tired of feeling not pretty or rich enough for the Strip, you are not alone. Come join us in admiring the project that closed off the heart of "Glitter Gulch" and turned it into a much more user-friendly pedestrian mall.

The Fremont Street Experience is a 5-block open-air landscaped strip of outdoor snack shops, vendor carts, and colorful kiosks purveying food and merchandise. Overhead is a 90-foot-high steel-mesh "celestial vault"; at night, it is the successfully revamped **Viva Vision,** a high-tech light-and-laser show that takes place five times nightly. But there's music between shows as well. Not only does the canopy provide shade, it cools the area through a misting system in summer and warms you with radiant heaters in winter. It's really cool, in that Vegas over-the-top way that we love so much. Go see for yourself; you will be pleased to see how a one-time ghost town of tacky, rapidly aging buildings, in an area with more undesirables than not, is now a bustling (at least at night), friendly, safe place (they have private security guards who hustle said undesirables away). It's a place where you can stroll, eat, or even dance to the music under the lights. The crowd it attracts is more upscale than in years past, and, of course, it's a lot less crowded than the hectic Strip. Some rightly mourn the passing of cruising Glitter Gulch, gawking at the original

lights. It does indeed mean the end of classic Las Vegas, but on the other hand, classic Las Vegas was dead and nearly buried anyway. This has given a second life to a deserving neighborhood.

And in a further effort to retain as much of classic Las Vegas as possible, the **Neon Museum** (**www.neonmuseum.org**) is installing vintage hotel and casino signs along the promenade. The first installation is the horse and rider from the old Hacienda, which presently rides the sky over the intersection of Fremont Street and Las Vegas Boulevard. Eventually, the Neon Museum hopes to have a complex at their Neon Boneyard, using the old La Concha Motel, itself a piece of classic Vegas architecture thankfully saved from the wrecking ball, as a centerpiece. It's uncertain when the complex will open, but in the meantime, you can do a self-guided walking tour of sign installations in Downtown.

Fremont St. (between Main St. and Las Vegas Blvd.), Downtown. www.vegasexperience.com. Free admission. Shows nightly.

GameWorks ★★ *Kids* What do you get when Steven Spielberg and his DreamWorks team get in on the arcade video-game action? Grown-up, state-of-the-art fun. High-tech movie magic has taken over all sorts of traditional arcade games and turned them interactive, from a virtual-reality batting cage to a *Jurassic Park* game that lets you hunt dinosaurs. There are motion-simulator rides galore and even actual-motion activities such as rock climbing. But classic games, from Pac-Man to pool tables, are here, too, though sometimes with surprising twists, such as air hockey where multiple pucks occasionally shoot out at once.

All this doesn't exactly come cheap. There are two routes to pricing. First is the standard version, where $15 gets you $15 in game play, $20 gets you $25, $25 gets you $35, or $35 gets you $50. Alternatively, you can purchase a block of time ($20 for 1 hr., $25 for 2 hr., $30 for 3 hr., $35 for all-day play; or if you get there at opening or closing, you get 2 hr. for $20), which goes on a debit card that you then insert into the various machines to activate them. It's a viable alternative to casinos, particularly if you have children (though it's clearly geared toward a high-school-age-and-older demographic). Children probably should be 10 years old and up—any younger and parents will need to stand over them rather than go off and have considerable fun on their own. ***Note:*** If you don't like crowds, come here earlier rather than later, when it can get packed. And no one under 18 is allowed without parental supervision after 9pm.

In the Showcase Mall, 3785 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/432-GAME.** www.gameworks.com. See game prices listed above in the review. Sun–Thurs 10am–midnight; Fri–Sat 10am–1am. Hours may vary.

Guggenheim/Hermitage Museum ★★ When two branches of the famous Guggenheim opened in Vegas, it was seen as a sure sign that Vegas was on its way to, or at least had an actual chance of, becoming a real city with real culture, and not just a glittery tourist trap. No one has said much now that the first branch, the one built for special exhibits, closed after just one show. The second branch, perhaps ultimately better reviewed and regarded, remains in operation, so maybe there is hope yet for Vegas's cultural significance. That museum, the Guggenheim/Hermitage, is the first co-venture between the Guggenheim and the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. The State Hermitage in St. Petersburg has one of the finest encyclopedic collections in the world, but few have had a chance to experience any of it. The exhibit at press time was a showing of Picasso, Monet "and more" treasures from the Hermitage and Guggenheim's collections. As always, we hope that future exhibits continue to feature more of those masterworks rarely, if ever, seen outside of Russia. After all, pricewise, too, we note again that both the Louvre and the Vatican come cheaper (well, once you pay to fly there) and offer quite a bit more.

In The Venetian, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **866/484-4849.** www.guggenheimlasvegas.org. $20 adults, $15 seniors and Nevada residents, $13 students with ID, $9.50 children 6–12, free for children under 6. Daily 9:30am–8:30pm.

IMAX Theatre & Ridefilm ★ *Kids* This is a state-of-the-art theater that offers both motion-simulator films and IMAX projects, some in standard two dimensions and one in 3-D. The glasses for the latter are really cool headsets (though they're a little too heavy for comfort) that include built-in speakers, bringing certain sounds right into your head. The movies change periodically but always include some extraordinary special effects. If you have a fear of heights, be sure to ask for a seat on one of the lower levels.

The IMAX Ridefilm is a motion-simulator ride with several different themed "adventures" playing at different times. You may find yourself hunting for an ancient relic in a pyramid or running from the ghoulies in Dracula's castle, among other amusements.

In Luxor Las Vegas, 3900 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/262-IMAX.** www.luxor.com. Admission $12 and up (prices vary depending on the movie) for IMAX Theatre; $10 for IMAX Ridefilm. Can be purchased as part of an all-attractions package for $35. Daily 10am–11pm. IMAX showtimes vary.

King Tut's Tomb & Museum ✪ This full-scale reproduction of King Tutankhamen's tomb includes the antechamber, annex, burial chamber, and treasury housing replicas of the glittering inventory discovered by archaeologists Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon in the Valley of Kings at Luxor in 1922. It was all handcrafted in Egypt by artisans using historically correct gold leaf and linens, pigments, tools, and ancient methods, and all items have been meticulously positioned according to Carter's records. It's hardly like seeing the real thing, but if you aren't going to Egypt any time soon, perhaps checking out reproductions isn't a bad idea—and for a Vegas fake, it's surprisingly enjoyable. A 4-minute introductory film precedes a 15-minute audio tour (available in English, French, Spanish, and Japanese).

In Luxor Las Vegas, 3900 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/262-4000.** www.luxor.com. Admission $10. Daily 10am–11pm.

Las Vegas Mini Gran Prix ✪✪✪ *Kids* Finally, after all our yammering about how Vegas isn't for families, we can wholeheartedly recommend an actual family-appropriate entertainment option. Part arcade, part go-kart racetrack, this is exactly what you want to help your kids (and maybe yourselves) work their ya-yas out. The arcade is well stocked, with a better quality of prizes than one often finds, but we suggest hustling outside to the slide, the little roller coaster, and best of all, the four go-kart tracks. Each offers a different thrill, from the longest road track in Vegas, full of twists and turns as you try to outrace other drivers (be a sport, let the little kids win occasionally), to a high-banked oval built just so you can try to make other drivers take spills onto the grass, to, best of all, a timed course. The last requires a driver's license, so it's for you rather than your kids (but the wee ones will find the fourth course is just for them), and here you can live out your Le Mans or police chase fantasies as you blast through twisting runs one kart at a time, trying to beat your personal best. A good kind of adrenaline rush, believe us. The staff is utterly friendly, and the pizzas at the food court are triple the size and half the price of those found in your hotel. The one drawback: It's far away from main Strip action—here's where you'll need that rental car, for sure. ***Note:*** Kids have to be at least 36 inches tall to ride any of the attractions.

1401 N. Rainbow Rd., just off U.S. 95 N. ✆ **702/259-7000.** www.lvmgp.com. Ride tickets $6.25 each, $29 for 5. Sun–Thurs 10am–10pm; Fri–Sat 10am–11pm.

Las Vegas Motor Speedway ✪✪ This 176,000-seat facility was the first new super-speedway to be built in the Southwest in

over 2 decades. A $200-million state-of-the-art motor-sports entertainment complex, it includes a 1½-mile super-speedway, a 2½-mile FIA-approved road course, paved and dirt short-track ovals, and a 4,000-foot drag strip. Also on the property are facilities for go-kart, Legends Car, Sand Drag, and Motocross competition, as well as driving schools, attractions, and more. Some major hotels have shuttles to the speedway during big events, so check with the front desk or concierge.

7000 Las Vegas Blvd. N., directly across from Nellis Air Force base (take I-15 north to Speedway exit 54). ✆ **702/644-4443** for ticket information. www.lvms.com. Tickets $10–$75 (higher prices for major events). Race days vary.

Liberace Museum ★★★ *Moments* Forget all that stuff we said before about the great museums of the world. You can keep your Louvres and Vaticans and Smithsonians: *This* is a museum. Housed, like everything else in Vegas, in a strip mall, this is a shrine to the glory and excess that was the art project known as Liberace. You've got your costumes (bejeweled), your many cars (bejeweled), your many pianos (bejeweled), and many jewels (also bejeweled). Also, the entrance itself is a giant jewel. It just shows what can be bought with lots of money and no taste.

The thing is, Liberace was in on the joke (we think). The people who come here largely aren't. Many of these guests would not have liked him living next door to them if his name was, say, Bruce Smith, but they idolize the-man-the-myth. Not found here is any reference to AIDS or chauffeurs who had plastic surgery to look more like him. But you will find a Czar Nicholas uniform with 22-karat-gold braiding and a blue-velvet cape styled after the coronation robes of King George V and covered with $60,000 worth of rare chinchilla. Not to mention a 50½-pound rhinestone costing $50,000, the world's largest, presented to him by the grateful (we bet they were) Austrian firm that supplied all his costume stones.

The museum is now better than ever, thanks to a costly renovation that turned what was once a too-low-key exhibition (especially given the subject matter) into something much more gaudy and over-the-top—and, better still, properly enshrined. Expect a ridiculously outrageous entrance (three words: giant pink piano) into rooms with various exhibits that finally give detailed attention to facts and figures. Admission has been cranked up, probably to pay for the renovations, but we don't mind—this is a one-of-a-kind place. Unless you have a severely underdeveloped appreciation for

camp or take your museum-going very seriously, you shouldn't miss it. The museum is 2½ miles east of the Strip on your right.

1775 E. Tropicana Ave. (at Spencer St.). ✆ **702/798-5595.** www.liberace.org. Admission $13 adults, $8.50 seniors over 64 and students, free for children 10 and under. Mon–Sat 10am–5pm; Sun noon–4pm. Closed Thanksgiving, Dec 25, and Jan 1.

Madame Tussauds Las Vegas ★★ *Kids* Madame Tussaud's waxworks exhibition has been the top London attraction for nearly 2 centuries, so even if you aren't a fan of wax museums, this, its sole branch west of the Mississippi, is probably worth a stop—if you can stomach the price. Figures here are state-of-the-art, painstakingly constructed to perfectly match the original person. (Truth be told, though some are nearly identical to their living counterparts—Brad Pitt gave us a start—others look about as much like the celebrity in question as a department-store mannequin.) All the waxworks are free-standing, allowing, and indeed encouraging, guests to get up close and personal. (Go ahead, lay your cheek next to Elvis's or Sinatra's and have your photo taken. You know you want to.) Live performers make the Haunted House section more stimulating than expected in a facility dedicated to statues. Exhibits change, but someone sheepishly enjoyable ought to be on display when you go through. There's also a behind-the-scenes look at the lengthy process involved in creating one of these figures.

In The Venetian, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/862-7800.** www.madametussauds lv.com. Admission $24 adults, $18 seniors, $15 students, $14 children 6–12, free for children 5 and under, $50 family pass for 2 adults and 2 students or children. Daily 10am–10pm, but hours vary seasonally.

Marjorie Barrick Museum ★ Formerly known as the Natural History Museum (as opposed to the existing Las Vegas Natural History Museum, and now you can see why they changed the name), here's a cool place to beat the heat and noise of Vegas while examining some attractive, if not overly imaginative, displays on Native American crafts and Las Vegas history. Crafts include 19th-century Mexican religious folk art, a variety of colorful dance masks of Mexico, and Native American pottery. The first part of the hall is often the highlight, with impressive traveling art exhibits. Children won't find much that's entertaining other than some glass cases containing examples of local, usually poisonous reptiles (who, if you are lucky—or unlucky, depending on your view—will be dining on mice when you drop by). Outside is a pretty garden demonstrating how attractive desert-appropriate plants (in other words, those

requiring little water) can be. You just wish the local casinos, with their lush and wasteful lawns, would take notice.

On the UNLV campus, 4505 Maryland Pkwy. ✆ **702/895-3381.** http://hrcweb.nevada.edu/museum. Free admission. Mon–Fri 8am–4:45pm; Sat 10am–2pm.

MGM Grand Lion Habitat ★★ *Kids* Hit this attraction at the right time and it's one of the best freebies in town. It's a large, multilevel glass enclosure in which various lions frolic during various times of day. In addition to regular viewing spots, you can walk through a glass tunnel and get a worm's-eye view of the underside of a lion (provided one is in position); note how very big Kitty's paws are. Multiple lions share show duties (about 6 hr. on and then 2 days off at a ranch for some free-range activity, so they're never cooped up here for long). So you could see any combo—from one giant male to a pack of five females who have grown from cub to near adult size during their MGM time. Each comes with a trainer or three, who are there to keep the lions busy with play so they don't act like the big cats they are and sleep the whole time. But obviously, photo ops are more likely to occur as the more frisky younger set tussles, so what you observe is definitely going to depend on who is in residence when you drop by. (And, of course, actually seeing anything depends on how many other people think this is a two-star attraction; hordes of tourists are often pressed against the glass, preventing you, not to mention your kids, from doing the same.)

In MGM Grand, 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/891-7777.** Free admission. Daily 11am–10pm.

Secret Garden of Siegfried and Roy and Mirage Dolphin Habitat ★★★ *Kids* Siegfried and Roy's famous white tigers recently became rather infamous when one of them either did what tigers all do, eventually, and attacked his beloved owner/trainer, or—depending on whether you buy this story—helped said beloved owner/trainer when the latter was having a medical emergency. Either way this story is played, it explains why this attraction is still up; no matter what, the tiger is not to blame. We hope this attraction, a gorgeous area behind the dolphin exhibit, stays put for a long time. Here, white lions, Bengal tigers, an Asian elephant, a panther, and a snow leopard join the white tigers. (The culprit, Montecore, is not exhibited any longer.) It's really just a glorified zoo featuring only the big-ticket animals; however, it is a very pretty place, with plenty of foliage and some bits of Indian- and Asian-themed architecture. Zoo purists will be horrified at the smallish spaces the animals occupy, but all the animals are rotated between here and their

more lavish digs at the illusionist team's home. What this does allow you to do is get very close up to a tiger, which is quite a thrill—those paws are massive indeed. Visitors are given little portable phonelike objects on which they can play a series of programs, listening to Roy and former Mirage owner Steve Wynn discuss conservation or the attributes of each animal, and deliver anecdotes.

The **Dolphin Habitat** ★★★ is more satisfying. It was designed to provide a healthy and nurturing environment and to educate the public about marine mammals and their role in the ecosystem. Specialists worldwide were consulted in creating the habitat, which was designed to serve as a model of a quality, man-made environment. The pool is more than eight times larger than government regulations require, and its 2.5 million gallons of man-made seawater are cycled and cleaned once every 2 hours. It must be working, as the adult dolphins here are breeding regularly. The Mirage displays only dolphins already in captivity—no dolphins are taken from the wild. You can watch the dolphins frolic both above and below ground through viewing windows, in three different pools. (There is nothing quite like the kick you get from seeing a baby dolphin play.) The knowledgeable staff, who surely have the best jobs in Vegas, will answer questions. If they aren't doing it already, ask them to play ball with the dolphins; they toss large beach balls into the pools, and the dolphins hit them out with their noses, leaping out of the water, cackling with dolphin glee. You catch the ball, getting nicely wet, and toss it back to them. If you have never played ball with a dolphin, shove that happy child next to you out of the way and go for it. You can stay as long as you like, which might just be hours.

In The Mirage, 3400 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/791-7111.** www.mirage.com. Admission $15 adults, $10 children 4–10, free for children under 4 if accompanied by an adult. Mon–Fri 11am–5:30pm; Sat–Sun and major holidays 10am–5:30pm. Hours subject to change and vary by season.

Shark Reef at Mandalay Bay ★ Given that watching fish can lower your blood pressure, it's practically a public service for Mandalay Bay to provide this facility in a city where craps tables and other gaming areas can bring your excitement level to dangerous heights. Unfortunately, it's just a giant aquarium (though we admire the style—it's built to look like a sunken temple), which, hey, we like, but not at these prices. (Though standing in the all-glass tunnel surrounded by sharks and finny friends was kinda cool.) Note also that it is *waaay* off in a remote part of Mandalay Bay, which might be a hassle for those with mobility problems.

In Mandalay Bay, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/632-4555.** www.mandalaybay.com. Admission $16 adults, $11 children 5–12, free for children under 5. Daily 10am–11pm.

SPEED: The Ride/Las Vegas Cyber Speedway ★★ Auto racing is the fastest-growing spectator sport in America, so it's no surprise that these two attractions at the Sahara are a popular stop. The first is an 8-minute virtual-reality ride, **Cyber Speedway,** featuring a three-quarter-size replica of a NASCAR race car. Hop aboard for an animated, simulated ride—either the Las Vegas Motor Speedway or a race around the streets of Las Vegas (start with the Strip, with all the hotels flashing by, and then through The Forum Shops—whoops! There goes Versace!—and so forth). Press the gas and you lean back and feel the rush of speed; hit a bump and you go flying. Should your car get in a crash, off you go to a pit stop. At the end, a computer-generated report tells you your average speed, how many laps you made, how you did racing against the others next to you, and so forth. It's a pretty remarkable experience.

Speed junkies and race-car buffs will be in heaven here, though those with tender stomachs should consider shopping at the well-stocked theme gift shop instead.

SPEED: The Ride is a roller coaster that blasts riders out through a hole in the wall by the NASCAR Cafe, then through a loop, under the sidewalk, through the hotel's marquee, and finally straight up a 250-foot tower. At the peak, you feel a moment of weightlessness, and then you do the entire thing backward! Not for the faint of heart.

In the Sahara, 2535 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/737-2111.** www.nascarcafelasvegas.com. $20 for all-day pass on both rides. Cyber Speedway (simulator) $10 (you must be at least 54 in. tall to ride); SPEED: The Ride (roller coaster) $10 for single ride. Sun–Thurs 11am–midnight; Fri–Sat 11am–1am; hours may vary.

Star Trek: The Experience* & *Borg Invasion 4-D ★ It goes without saying that hard-core Trekkers (note use of correct term) will be delighted. On the other hand, normal, sensible fans and those who couldn't care less about *Star Trek* may find themselves saying, "I spent $43 and 2 hours in line for this?"

This is the undisputed champ in the Vegas motion-simulator ride category. You can't fault the setup and interior design; after a walk through a space-themed casino, your long wait in line will be somewhat entertaining, thanks to memorabilia (displayed as if this were the stuff of fact, not fiction) and TVs showing various *Trek* clips. As you make your way to the ride proper, you encounter actors dressed in *Trek* gear, who let you know that you've crossed the line into the *Trek* future.

There is a story line, but we won't spoil it for you. Suffice it to say that it involves time travel and evil doings by the Borg, and if all doesn't work out, the very history of *Star Trek* could be affected. Do expect to be beamed aboard the *Enterprise* (that's really kind of cool), and know that if you have a sensitive stomach, you can skip the actual motion-simulator part, a wild and sometimes headache-inducing chase through space. The recently added *Borg Invasion 4-D* is a 3-D film starring several *Star Trek: Voyager* cast members, and because it's "multimedia," there are more live actors, plus some surprises as the film plays (we don't want to give much away, but be prepared to have your anatomy unexpectedly poked). It is as well designed as the original portion and does give this attraction added value for the money. It will also send most Trekkers into orbit with happiness. In addition to the often-lengthy wait (on average, 20 min.; best shot at a slight lull would be noon–1pm on weekdays), the quality of your experience can vary depending on the quality of those *Trek*-garbed actors, whose line delivery can be awfully stilted. On the way out, through the shops selling everything *Trek* and space related (go ahead, get that Tribble you've always wanted), don't miss the TV showing a "news report" about some of the very things you just experienced.

In Las Vegas Hilton, 3000 Paradise Rd. ✆ **888/GO-BOLDLY.** www.startrekexp.com. All-day pass including both attractions and museum: $43 adults, $40 seniors, and $38 children 12 and under. Purchase tickets online for discounts. Daily 11:30am–7:30pm or 9:30pm, depending on the season.

Stratosphere Thrill Rides ★★ *Kids* Atop the 1,149-foot Stratosphere Tower are three marvelous thrill rides. There used to be four, but they closed the roller coaster to make way for something even more stomach-churning. That's okay—it was the least thrilling of the thrills. The **Big Shot** is a breathtaking free-fall ride that thrusts you 160 feet in the air along a 228-foot spire at the top of the tower, and then plummets back down again. Sitting in an open car, you seem to be dangling in space over Las Vegas. We have one relative, a thrill-ride enthusiast, who said he never felt more scared than when he rode the Big Shot. After surviving, he promptly put his kids on it; they loved it. Amping up the terror factor is **X-Scream,** a giant teeter-totter-style device that propels you in an open car off the side of the 100-story tower and lets you dangle there weightlessly before returning you to relative safety. And now they have the aptly named **Insanity: the Ride,** a spinning whirligig of a contraption that straps you into a seat and twirls you around 1,000 feet or so above terra firma. Insanity is right. ***Note:*** The rides are shut down in inclement weather and high winds.

Atop Stratosphere Las Vegas, 2000 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/380-7777.** Admission: Big Shot $9; X-Scream $9; Insanity $9; plus fee to ascend Tower: $10 for adults; $6 for locals, seniors, hotel guests, and children 4–12; free for children 3 and under and those dining in the buffet room or Top of the World. Multiride and all-day packages also available for varying costs. Sun–Thurs 10am–1am; Fri–Sat 10am–2am. Hours vary seasonally. Minimum height requirement for Big Shot is 48 in., minimum height requirement for X-Scream and Insanity is 52 in.

2 Getting Married

This is one of the most popular things to do in Las Vegas. Just ask Britney. As she rather infamously revealed, it's very easy to get married here. Too easy. See that total stranger standing next to you? Grab him or her and head down to the **Clark County Marriage License Bureau,** 201 Clark Ave. (✆ **702/455-4415;** daily 8am–midnight), to get your license. Find a wedding chapel (not hard because there are about 50 of them in town; they line the north end of the Strip, and most hotels have one), and tie the knot. Just like that. No blood test, no waiting period—heck, not even an awkward dating period.

You can also call **Las Vegas Weddings** (✆ **800/488-MATE;** www.lasvegasweddings.com), which offers one-stop shopping for wedding services. They'll find a chapel or outdoor garden that suits your taste (not to mention such only-in-Vegas venues as the former mansions of Elvis Presley and Liberace); book you into a hotel for the honeymoon; arrange the ceremony; and provide flowers, a photographer (or videographer), a wedding cake, a limo, car rental, music, champagne, balloons, and a garter for the bride. Basically, they can arrange anything you like. Theme weddings are a specialty.

Weddings can be very cheap in Vegas: A license is about $55, and a basic service not much more. Even a full-blown shebang package—photos, music, some flowers, video, cake, and other doodads—will run only about $500 total. We haven't quoted any prices here, because the ultimate cost depends entirely on how much you want to spend. Go cheap, and the whole thing will put you back maybe $100, including the license (maybe even somewhat less); go elaborate, and the price is still reasonable by today's wedding price standards. Be sure to remember that there are often hidden charges, such as expected gratuities for the minister (about $25 would do; no real need to tip anyone else), and so forth. And be aware that Valentine's Day is a very popular day to get married in Vegas. Some of the chapels perform as many as 80 services on February 14.

Cupid's Wedding Chapel "The little chapel with the big heart." Well, it just might be. The manager explains that, unlike other chapels on the Strip, this one schedules weddings an hour apart to provide time for the full production number. The folks at Cupid's pride themselves on offering "a traditional church wedding at a chapel price." This includes a bridal processional, dimmed lights as the minister introduces the happy couple, and then a tape of the couple's favorite song so they can have their first dance right there at the pulpit after their "first" kiss. They also offer family weddings for those couples blending preexisting families; the children become a part of the service, and as their parents exchange rings with each other, the kids are given their own small token, to let them know the parents are marrying them as well. The chapel is pleasantly low-frills and down-to-earth, with white walls and pews, and modern stained glass with doves and roses. (Kitsch-phobes will be pleased to know that the cupids are only in the lobby.) It seats 60 to 70. They added a classic banquet hall (and by that we mean New Jersey banquet hall) so you can have your reception and wedding all in one place.

827 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (between Gass and Hoover aves.). ✆ **800/543-2933** or 702/598-4444. www.cupidswedding.com. Weddings by appointment only, hours vary.

San Francisco Sally's Victorian Chapel *Finds* This is an extremely tiny wedding chapel, bursting at the seams with Victorian frills (fringed lamps, swags of lace curtains). It basically offers "an Olde Tyme Parlor Wedding." This is perfect if you want a very intimate wedding—like you, your intended, and someone to officiate. It literally can't hold more than six people. (And the space at the back of the room opens for an even tinier reception area—it can barely fit the cake!) But if you love Victoriana or you want to play dress-up at your wedding, this is the place. The shop rents out dresses and costumes, so you can wear a Scarlett O'Hara antebellum outfit or some other period number for your big day. (It's all fantasy anyway, so why not go whole hog?) Sally's specializes in extras without extra charges, such as altering and whatnot. The women who run it refer to themselves as "a bunch of mother hens"; they're delightful and will pamper you to within an inch of your life. (One couple drops in every year just to say hi.) Some may find it a bit cutesy, but it really is quite charming and has its own distinct personality, unlike most of the other chapels in the area (where the interiors all start to blur together after a while). This is a decidedly special place that, depending on your wedding desires and fantasies, might be just right.

1304 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (between E. Oakey and Charleston boulevards). ✆ **702/385-7777.** Mon–Sat 10am–6pm; Sun 10am–4pm.

A Special Memory Wedding Chapel ★ This is a very nice wedding chapel, particularly compared to the rather tired facades of the classics on the Strip. This is absolutely the place to go if you want a traditional, big-production wedding; you won't feel it the least bit tacky. It's a New England church–style building, complete with steeple. The interior looks like a proper church (well, a plain one—don't think ornate Gothic cathedral) with a peaked roof, pews with padded red seats, modern stained-glass windows of doves and flowers, and lots of dark wood. It's all very clean and new, and seats about 87 comfortably. There is a short staircase leading to an actual bride's room; she can make an entrance coming down it or through the double doors at the back. The area outside the chapel is like a minimall of bridal paraphernalia stores. Should all this just be too darned nice and proper for you, they also offer a drive-up window (where they do about 300 weddings a month!). It'll cost you $25—just ring the buzzer for service. They have a photo studio on-site and will do receptions featuring a small cake, cold cuts, and champagne. There is a gazebo for outside weddings, and they sell T-shirts!

800 S. 4th St. (at Gass Ave.). ✆ **800/962-7798** or 702/384-2211. www.aspecialmemory.com. Sun–Thurs 8am–10pm; Fri–Sat 8am–midnight.

3 Especially for Kids

Like much of the rest of the world, you may be under the impression that Las Vegas has evolved from an adults-only fantasyland into a vacation destination suitable for the entire family. The only explanation for this myth is that Las Vegas was referred to as "Disneyland for adults" by so many and for so long that the town became momentarily confused and decided it actually *was* Disneyland. Some of the gargantuan hotels then spent small fortunes on redecorating in an attempt to lure families with vast quantities of junk food and a lot of hype. They now vehemently deny that any such notion ever crossed their collective minds, and, no, they don't know how that roller coaster got into the parking lot.

To put things simply, Las Vegas makes money—lots and lots of money—by promoting gambling, drinking, and sex. These are all fine pursuits if you happen to be an adult, but if you haven't reached the magical age of 21, you really don't count in this town. In any case, the casinos and even the Strip itself are simply too stimulating, noisy, and smoky for young kids.

Older progeny may have a tolerance for crowds and the incessant pinging of the slot machines, but they will be thoroughly annoyed with you when casino security chastises them if they so much as stop to tie their shoelaces anywhere near the gaming tables. Since you can't get from your hotel room to the parking lot without ambling through a casino, you can't reasonably expect a teenager to be in a good mood once you stagger outside. And those amusement parks and video halls that haven't yet been purged are very expensive places to park your kids for an afternoon or evening, assuming they are old enough to be left unsupervised.

Nevertheless, you may have a perfectly legitimate reason for bringing your children to Las Vegas (like Grandma was busy, or you were just stopping off on your way from somewhere else), so here are some places to take the children both on and off the Strip.

The Adventuredome ★ *Kids* This an okay place to spend a hot afternoon, especially now that it's about all that remains of the great Vegas-Is-For-Kids-Too experiment. Plus, unlike most theme parks, it's indoors! The glass dome that towers overhead lets in natural light. Even so, the place is looking a little ragged, like it knows it's now an afterthought rather than a centerpiece. A double-loop roller coaster careens around the simulated Grand Canyon, and there's the requisite water flume, a laser-tag area, some bouncy/twirly/stomach-churning type rides, and a modest number of other tamer rides for kids of all ages. Video games and a carnival-style arcade are separate from the attractions, though it all still feels pretty hectic. The *SpongeBob SquarePants 4-D* ride is disappointing, as the technology is about 10 years behind the times and the story is hard to follow, thanks to bad acoustics. We suggest that you not leave kids here alone; they could easily get lost.

2880 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (behind Circus Circus). ✆ **702/794-3939.** www.adventuredome.com. Free admission; pay per ride $4–$7; daily pass $23 adults, $15 children 33–47 in. tall. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Park hours vary seasonally but are usually Mon–Thurs 10am–6pm; Fri–Sat 10am–midnight; Sun 10am–9pm.

Las Vegas Natural History Museum ★ *Kids* Conveniently located across the street from the Lied Discovery Children's Museum (described below), this humble temple of taxidermy harkens back to elementary-school field trips, around 1965, when stuffed elk and brown bears forever protecting their kill were as close as most of us got to exotic animals. Worn around the edges but very sweet and relaxed, the museum is enlivened by a hands-on activity room and two life-size dinosaurs that roar at one another intermittently (you

might want to warn any sensitive little ones that the big tyrannosaurs aren't going anywhere). Surprisingly, the gift shop here is particularly well stocked with neat items you won't too terribly mind buying for the kids. When you are finished, you might as well scoot around the corner to the **Old Fort,** which isn't a strong enough attraction on its own but is a logical transition from this destination.

900 Las Vegas Blvd. N. (at Washington Ave.). ✆ **702/384-3466.** www.lvnhm.org. Admission $7 adults; $6 seniors, students, and military; $3 children 3–11; free for children under 3. Daily 9am–4pm.

Lied Discovery Children's Museum ★★ *Finds Kids* A hands-on science museum designed for curious kids, the bright, airy, two-story Lied makes an ideal outing for toddlers and young children. With lots of interactive exhibits to examine, including a miniature grocery store, a tube for encasing oneself inside a soap bubble, a radio station where attendees can perform karaoke, and music and drawing areas, you'll soon forget your video/poker losses. Clever, thought-inducing exhibits are everywhere. Learn how it feels to be physically disabled by playing basketball from a wheelchair. Feed a wooden "sandwich" to a cutout of a snake and to a human cutout, and see how much nutrition each receives. See how much sunscreen their giant stuffed mascot needs to keep from burning. On Saturday afternoons from 1 to 3pm, free drop-in art classes are offered, giving adults a bit of time to ramble around the gift store or read the fine print on the exhibit placards. The Lied also shares space with a city library branch, so after the kids run around, you can calm them back down with a story or two.

833 Las Vegas Blvd. N. (a half-block south of Washington, across the street from Cashman Field). ✆ **702/382-3445.** www.ldcm.org. Admission $8 adults; $7 seniors, military, and children 1–17. Tues–Fri 9am–4pm; Sat 10am–5pm; Sun noon–5pm.

4 Fore! Great Desert Golf

In addition to the listings below, there are dozens of local courses, including some very challenging ones that have hosted PGA tournaments. ***Note:*** Greens fees vary radically depending on time of day and year. Also, call for opening and closing times because these change frequently.

Note also that the **Rio All-Suite Hotel** (p. 43) has a golf course.

Angel Park Golf Club ★★ This 36-hole, par-70/71 public course is a local favorite. Arnold Palmer originally designed the Mountain and Palm courses. (The Palm Course was redesigned several years later by Bob Cupp.) Players call this a great escape from the casinos,

claiming that no matter how many times they play it, they never get tired of it. The Palm Course has gently rolling fairways that offer golfers of all abilities a challenging yet forgiving layout. The Mountain Course has rolling natural terrain and gorgeous panoramic views. In addition to these two challenging 18-hole courses, Angel Park offers a night-lit Cloud 9 Course (12 holes for daylight play, 9 at night), where each hole is patterned after a famous par 3. You can reserve tee times up to 60 days in advance with a credit card guarantee.

Yardage: Palm Course 6,525 championship and 5,438 resort; Mountain Course 6,722 championship and 5,718 resort.

Facilities: Pro shop, night-lit driving range, 18-hole putting course, restaurant, snack bar, cocktail bar, and beverage cart.

100 S. Rampart Blvd. (between Summerlin Pkwy. and Alta St.; 20 min. northwest of the Strip). ✆ **888/629-3929** or 702/254-0566. www.angelpark.com. Greens fees $75–$155. Discounted twilight rates available.

Bali Hai Golf Club ★★★ One of the newest and most exclusive golf addresses belongs to this multimillion-dollar course built in 2000 on the Strip just south of Mandalay Bay. Done in a wild South Seas theme, the par-72 course has over 7 acres of water features, including an island green, palm trees, and tropical foliage everywhere you look. Not impressed yet? How about the fact that all their golf carts are equipped with global positioning systems (GPSs)? Or that celeb chef Wolfgang Puck chose to open his newest Vegas eatery here? Okay, if that doesn't convince you of the upscale nature of the joint, check out the greens fees. Even at those prices, tee times are often booked 6 months in advance.

Yardage: 7,002 championship.

Facilities: Pro shop, putting green, gourmet restaurant, grill, and lounge.

5150 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **888/427-6678.** www.balihaigolfclub.com. Greens fees $99–$395.

Craig Ranch Golf Club *Value* This is a flat 18-hole, par-70 public course with many trees and bunkers; both narrow and open fairways feature Bermuda turf. The greens fees are a bargain, and you can reserve tee times 7 days in advance.

Yardage: 6,001 regular and 5,221 ladies.

Facilities: Driving range, pro shop, PGA teaching pro, putting green, and snack bar.

628 W. Craig Rd. (between Losee Rd. and Martin Luther King Blvd.). ✆ **702/642-9700.** Greens fees $19 walking, $30 in golf cart.

Desert Rose Golf Club ★ *Value* This is an 18-hole, par-71 public course built in 1963 and designed by Dick Wilson and Joe Lee. Narrow fairways feature Bermuda turf. You can reserve tee times up to 7 days in advance.

Yardage: 6,511 championship; 6,135 regular; and 5,458 ladies.

Facilities: Driving range, putting and chipping greens, PGA teaching pro, pro shop, restaurant, and cocktail lounge.

5483 Clubhouse Dr. (3 blocks west of Nellis Blvd., off Sahara Ave.). ✆ **800/470-4622** or 702/566-7618. Greens fees $60–$80, including cart rental.

Las Vegas National Golf Club ★ This is an 18-hole (about 8 with water on them), par-71 public course, and a classic layout (not the desert layout you'd expect). If you play from the back tees, it can really be a challenge. The 1996 Las Vegas Invitational, won by Tiger Woods, was held here. Discounted tee times are often available. Reservations are taken up to 60 days in advance.

Yardage: 6,815 championship, 6,418 regular, and 5,741 ladies.

Facilities: Pro shop, golf school, driving range, restaurant, and cocktail lounge.

1911 Desert Inn Rd. (between Maryland Pkwy. and Eastern Ave.). ✆ **702/734-1796.** www.lasvegasnational.com. Greens fees $60–$179, some including cart rental.

5 Staying Active

You need not be a slot-hypnotized slug when you come to Vegas. The city and surrounding areas offer plenty of opportunities for active sports. In addition to many highly rated golf courses (described above), just about every hotel has a large swimming pool and health club, and tennis courts abound.

BOWLING Serious bowlers have some good options to choose from. **Gold Coast Hotel,** 4000 W. Flamingo Rd. (at Valley View; ✆ **702/367-7111**), has a 72-lane bowling center open daily 24 hours. The **Orleans,** 4500 W. Tropicana Ave. (✆ **702/365-7111**), has 70 lanes, a pro shop, lockers, meeting rooms, and more; it's also open daily 24 hours.

Out on the east side of town, you'll find 56 lanes at **Sam's Town,** 5111 Boulder Hwy. (✆ **702/456-7777**), plus a snack shop, cocktail lounge, video arcade, day-care center, pro shop, and more. Open daily 24 hours.

South Point, 9777 Las Vegas Blvd. (✆ **702/796-7400**), opened in 2006 and features a 64-lane facility with all the latest gee-whiz scoring and automation plus the usual amenities. Open 24 hours.

ROCK CLIMBING **Red Rock Canyon** ★★★, just 19 miles west of Las Vegas, is one of the world's most popular rock-climbing areas. In addition to awe-inspiring natural beauty, it offers everything from boulders to big walls. If you'd like to join the bighorn sheep, Red Rock has more than 1,000 routes to inaugurate beginners and challenge accomplished climbers. Experienced climbers can contact the **visitor center** (✆ **702/515-5350;** www.redrockcanyon.blm.gov) for information.

TENNIS Tennis used to be a popular pastime in Vegas, but these days, buffs only have a couple of choices at hotels in town that have tennis courts.

Bally's ★★ (✆ **702/739-4111**) has eight night-lit hard courts. Fees per hour start at $12 for guests and $20 for nonguests. Facilities include a pro shop. Hours vary seasonally. Reservations are advised.

The Flamingo Las Vegas ★★ (✆ **702/733-3444**) has four outdoor hard courts (all lit for night play) and a pro shop. It's open to the public daily from 8am to 5pm. Rates are $12 per hour for guests, $20 per hour for nonguests. Lessons are available. Reservations are required.

In addition to hotels, the **University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV)** ★★, Harmon Avenue just east of Swenson Street (✆ **702/895-0844**), has a dozen courts (all lit for night play) that are open weekdays from 6am to 9:45pm, weekends 8am to 9pm. Rates are $5 per person per day.

6

About Casino Gambling

What? You didn't come to Las Vegas for the Liberace Museum? We are shocked. Shocked.

Yes, there are gambling opportunities in Vegas. We've noticed this. You will, too. The tip-off will be the slot machines in the airport as soon as you step off the plane. Or the slot machines in the convenience stores as soon as you drive across the state line. Let's not kid ourselves, gambling is what Vegas is about. The bright lights, the shows, the showgirls, the food—it's all there just to lure you in and make you open your wallet. (The free drinks certainly help ease the latter as well.)

You can disappoint them if you want, but what would be the point? *This is Las Vegas.* You don't have to be a high roller. You would not believe how much fun you can have with a nickel slot machine. You won't get rich, but neither will most of those guys playing the $5 slots, either.

Of course, that's not going to stop anyone from trying. Almost everyone plays in Vegas with the hopes of winning The Big One. That only a few ever do win doesn't stop them from trying again and again. That's how the casinos make their money, by the way.

Remember also that there is no system that's sure to help you win. We all have our own systems and our own ideas. Reading books and listening to others at the tables will help you pick up some tips, but if there were a surefire way to win, the casinos would have taken care of it. Try to have the courage to walk away when your bankroll is up, not down. Remember, your children's college fund is just that, and not a gambling-budget supplement.

1 The Major Games

Before you put your money on the line, it's imperative to know the rules of the game you want to play. Most casinos offer free gambling lessons that include low-stakes games, so you won't lose much while you learn. During those instructional sessions (usually held only on weekdays), and even when playing on your own, dealers in most

casinos will be more than happy to answer any questions you might have. Remember, the casino doesn't need to trick you into losing your money . . . the odds are already in their favor across-the-board; that's why it's called gambling. Another rule of thumb: Take a few minutes to watch a game being played in order to familiarize yourself with the motions and lingo. Then go back and reread this section—things will make a lot more sense at that point. Good luck!

BLACKJACK

The dealer starts the game by dealing each player two cards. In some casinos, they're dealt to the player faceup, in others facedown, but the dealer always gets one card up and one card down. Everybody plays against the dealer. The object is to get a total that is higher than that of the dealer without exceeding 21. All face cards count as 10; all other number cards, except aces, are counted at their face value. An ace may be counted as 1 or 11, whichever you choose it to be.

Starting at his or her left, the dealer gives additional cards to the players who wish to draw (be "hit") or none to a player who wishes to "stand" or "hold." If your count is nearer to 21 than the dealer's, you win. If it's under the dealer's, you lose. Ties are a push and nobody wins. After all the players are satisfied with their counts, the dealer exposes his or her facedown card. If his or her two cards total 16 or less, the dealer must "hit" (draw an additional card) until reaching 17 or over. If the dealer's total exceeds 21, he or she must pay all the players whose hands have not gone "bust." It is important to note here that the blackjack dealer has no choice as to whether he or she should stay or draw. A dealer's decisions are predetermined and known to all the players at the table.

If you're a novice or just rusty, do yourself a favor and buy one of the small laminated cards available in shops all over town that illustrate proper play for every possible hand in blackjack. Even longtime players have been known to pull them out every now and then, and they can save you from making costly errors.

HOW TO PLAY

Here are eight "rules" for blackjack:

1. Place the number of chips that you want to bet on the betting space on your table.
2. Look at the first two cards the dealer starts you with. If you wish to "stand" then wave your hand over your cards, palm down (watch your fellow players), indicating that you don't

wish any additional cards. If you elect to draw an additional card, you tell the dealer to "hit" you by tapping the table with a finger (watch your fellow players).

3. If your count goes over 21, you are "bust" and lose, even if the dealer also goes "bust" afterward.
4. If you make 21 in your first two cards (any picture card or 10 with an ace), you've got blackjack. You will be paid 1½ times your bet, provided the dealer does not have blackjack, too, in which case it's a push and nobody wins.
5. If you find a "pair" in your first two cards (say, two 8s or two aces), you may "split" the pair into two hands and treat each card as the first card dealt in two separate hands. You will need to place an additional bet, equal to your original bet, on the table. The dealer will then deal you a new *second* card to the first split card, and play commences as described above. This will be done for the second split card as well. ***Note:*** When you split aces you will receive only one additional card per ace and must "stand."
6. After seeing your two starting cards, you have the option to "double down." You place an amount equal to your original bet on the table and you receive only one more card. Doubling down is a strategy to capitalize on a potentially strong hand against the dealer's weaker hand. ***Tip:*** You may double down for less than your original bet, but never for more.
7. Anytime the dealer deals himself or herself an ace for the "up" card, you may insure your hand against the possibility that the hole card is a 10 or face card, which would give him or her an automatic blackjack. To insure, you place an amount up to one-half of your bet on the "insurance" line (it's a sucker bet, so we don't recommend this). If the dealer does have a blackjack you get paid 2 to 1 on the insurance money while losing your original bet: You break even. If the dealer does not have a blackjack, he or she takes your insurance money and play continues in the normal fashion.
8. ***Remember:*** The dealer must stand on 17 or more and must hit a hand of 16 or less.

CRAPS

The most exciting casino action is always at the craps tables. Betting is frenetic, play fast-paced, and groups quickly bond while yelling and screaming in response to the action.

THE POSSIBLE BETS

The craps table is divided into marked areas (Pass, Come, Field, Big 6, Big 8, and so on), where you place your chips to bet. The following are a few simple directions.

PASS LINE A "Pass Line" bet pays even money. If the first roll of the dice adds up to 7 or 11, you win your bet; if the first roll adds up to 2, 3, or 12, you lose your bet. If any other number comes up, it's your "point." If you roll your point again, you win, but if a 7 comes up again before your point is rolled, you lose.

DON'T PASS LINE Betting on the "Don't Pass" is the opposite of betting on the "Pass Line." This time, you lose if a 7 or an 11 is thrown on the first roll, and you win if a 2 or a 3 is thrown on the first roll.

If the first roll is 12, however, it's a push (standoff), and nobody wins. If none of these numbers is thrown and you have a point instead, in order to win, a 7 will have to be thrown before the point comes up again. A "Don't Pass" bet also pays even money.

COME Betting on "Come" is the same as betting on the Pass Line, but you must bet after the first roll or on any following roll. Again, you'll win on 7 or 11 and lose on 2, 3, or 12. Any other number is your point, and you win if your point comes up again before a 7.

DON'T COME This is the opposite of a "Come" bet. Again, you wait until after the first roll to bet. A 7 or an 11 means you lose; a 2 or a 3 means you win; 12 is a push, and nobody wins. You win if 7 comes up before the point. (The point, you'll recall, was the first number rolled if it was none of the above.)

FIELD This is a bet for one roll only. The "Field" consists of seven numbers: 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, and 12. If any of these numbers is thrown on the next roll, you win even money, except on 2 and 12, which pay 2 to 1 (at some casinos 3 to 1).

BIG 6 AND 8 A "Big 6 and 8" bet pays even money. You win if either a 6 or an 8 is rolled before a 7. Mathematically, this is a sucker's bet.

ANY 7 An "Any 7" bet pays the winner 5 for 1. If a 7 is thrown on the first roll after you bet, you win.

"HARD WAY" BETS In the middle of a craps table are pictures of several possible dice combinations together with the odds the casino will pay you if you bet and win on any of those combinations being thrown. For example, if double 3s or 4s are rolled and you had

bet on them, you will be paid 7 to 1. If double 2s or 5s are rolled and you had bet on them, you will be paid 9 to 1. If either a 7 is rolled or the number you bet on was rolled any way other than the "Hard Way," then the bet is lost. In-the-know gamblers tend to avoid "Hard Way" bets as an easy way to lose their money.

ANY CRAPS Here you're lucky if the dice "crap out"—if they show 2, 3, or 12 on the first roll after you bet. If this happens, the bank pays 7 to 1. Any other number is a loser.

PLACE BETS You can make a "Place Bet" on any of the following numbers: 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, or 10. You're betting that the number you choose will be thrown before a 7 is thrown. If you win, the payoff is as follows: 4 or 10 pays at the rate of 9 to 5, 5 or 9 pays at the rate of 7 to 5, 6 or 8 pays at the rate of 7 to 6. "Place Bets" can be removed at any time before a roll.

SOME PROBABILITIES

Because each die has six sides numbered from 1 to 6, and craps is played with a pair of dice, the probability of throwing certain numbers has been studied carefully. Professionals have employed complex mathematical formulas in searching for the answers. And computers have data-processed curves of probability.

Suffice it to say that 7 (a crucial number in craps) will be thrown more frequently than any other number over the long run, which favors the casino. You can't beat the law of averages.

POKER

Poker is the game of the Old West. There's at least one sequence in every Western where the hero faces off against the villain over a poker hand. In Las Vegas, poker is just about the biggest thing going, thanks to the prevalence and popularity of celebrity poker TV shows, poker tours, books, magazines, and who knows what all. Just about every casino now has a poker room, and it's just a matter of time before the others catch up.

There are lots of variations on the basic game, but one of the most popular is **Hold 'Em.** Two cards are dealt face down to the players. After a betting round, five community cards (everyone can use them) are dealt face up on the table. Players make the best five-card hand, using their own cards and the "board" (the community cards), and the best hand wins. The house dealer takes care of the shuffling and the dealing, and moves a marker around the table to alternate the start of the deal. The house rakes 1% to 5% (it depends

on the casino) from each pot. Most casinos also provide tables for playing Seven-Card Stud, Omaha High, and Omaha Hi-Lo. A few will even have Seven-Card Stud Hi-Lo split. To learn how these variations are played, either read a book or take lessons.

Warning: If you don't know how to play poker, don't attempt to learn at a table. Card sharks are not a rare species in Vegas; they will gladly feast on fresh meat (you!). Find a casino that provides free gaming lessons and learn, to paraphrase Kenny Rogers, when to hold 'em, and when to fold 'em.

ROULETTE

Roulette is an extremely easy game to play, and it's really quite colorful and exciting to watch. The wheel spins and the little ball bounces around, finally dropping into one of the slots, numbered 1 to 36, plus 0 and 00. You can place bets "Inside" the table and "Outside" the table. Inside bets are bets placed on a particular number or a set of numbers. Outside bets are those placed in the boxes surrounding the number table. If you bet on a specific number and it comes up, you'll be paid 35 to 1 on your bet. Bear in mind, however, that the odds of a particular number coming up are actually 38 to 1 (don't forget that 0 and 00!) so the house has an advantage the moment you place an Inside bet. The methods of placing single-number bets, column bets, and others are fairly obvious. The dealer will be happy to show you how make many interesting betting combinations, such as betting on six numbers at once. Each player is given different-colored chips so that it's easy to follow the numbers you've bet on.

SLOTS

You put the coin in the slot and pull the handle. What, you thought there was a trick to this?

Actually, there is a bit more to it. But first, some background. Old-timers will tell you slots were invented to give wives something to do while their husbands gambled. Slots used to be stuck at the edges of the casino and could be counted on one hand, maybe two. But now they *are* the casino. The casinos make more from slots than from craps, blackjack, and roulette combined. There are 140,000 slot machines (not including video poker) in the county. Some of these are at the airport, steps from you as you deplane. It's a just a matter of time before the planes flying into Vegas feature slots that pop up as soon as you cross the state line.

But in order to keep up with the increasing competition, the plain old machine, where reels just spin, has become nearly obsolete. Now they are all computerized and have added buttons to push so you can avoid getting carpal tunnel syndrome from yanking the handle all night. (The handles are still there on many of them.) Many don't even have reels anymore but are entirely video screens, which offer a number of little bonus extras that have nothing to do with actual play. The idea is still simple: Get three (sometimes four) cherries (clowns, sevens, dinosaurs, whatever) in a row and you win something. Each machine has its own combination. Some will pay you something with just one symbol showing; on most, the more combinations there are, the more opportunities for loot. Some will even pay if you get three blanks. Study each machine to learn what it does. ***Note:*** The **payback** goes up considerably if you bet the limit (from 2 to as many as 45 coins).

Progressive slots are groups of linked machines (sometimes spread over several casinos) where the jackpot gets bigger every few moments (just as lottery jackpots build up). And, of course, there are always those **giant slot machines,** gimmicky devices found in almost every casino. They may not win as often as regular slots (though there is no definite word on it one way or the other), but not only are they just plain fun to spin, they often turn into audience-participation gambling, as watchers gather to cheer you on to victory.

Nickel slots are making a comeback. Many machines now offer a 45-nickel maximum (meaning a larger bet on those machines than on the five-quarter-maximum slots), and gamblers have been flocking to them. As a result, more cash is pocketed by the casino (which keeps a higher percentage of cash off nickel slots than it does off of quarter slots), which is happy to accommodate this trend by offering up more and more nickel slots. (See how this all works? Are you paying attention?)

The biggest trend in Vegas, though, is the use of **cashless machines.** When gambling with these machines, players insert their money, they play, and when they cash out, they get—instead of the comforting rush of coins cascading out into the tray—a little paper ticket with their total winnings on it. (Those of us who find the sound of the coins pouring out a comfort are only slightly pleased to learn that that noise plays, as a computer-generated audio effect, when the ticket is disgorged.) It's not nearly as viscerally satisfying, but it is the wave of the future; many of the casinos are already entirely cashless, and the rest are on their way.

Are there surefire ways to win on a slot machine? No. A good rule of thumb is that if your slot doesn't hit something in four or five pulls, leave it and go find another. It's not as though you won't have some choice in the matter.

VIDEO POKER

Rapidly coming up on slots in popularity, video poker works the same way as regular poker, except that you play against the machine. You are dealt a hand, you pick which cards to keep and which to discard, and then get your new hand. And, it is hoped, you collect your winnings. This is somewhat more of a challenge and more active than slots because you have some control (or at least the illusion of control) over your fate, and it's easier than playing actual poker with a table full of folks who probably take it very seriously.

There are a number of varieties of this machine, with **Jacks or Better, Deuces Wild,** and so forth. Be sure to study your machine before you sit down. The Holy Grail of video-poker machines is the 9/6 (it pays nine coins for a full house, six coins for a flush), but you'll need to pray a lot before you find one in town.

Technology is catching up with video poker, too. Now they even have touch screens, which offer a variety of different poker games, blackjack, and video slots—just touch your screen and choose your poison.

2 The Casinos

Casino choice is a personal thing. Some like to find their lucky place and stick with it, while others love to take advantage of the nearly endless choices that Vegas offers. Everyone should casino-hop at least once to marvel (or get dizzy) at the decor/spectacle and the sheer excess of it all. But beyond decoration, there isn't too much difference. You've got your slot machines, your gaming tables, and your big chandeliers.

Don't be a snob, and don't be overly dazzled by the fancy casinos. Sometimes you can have a better time at one of the older places Downtown, where stakes are lower, pretensions are nonexistent, and the clientele is often friendlier. Frankly, real gamblers—and by that we don't necessarily mean high rollers, but those who play to win regardless of the amount of said win—head straight for Downtown (and most often, straight for Binion's) for these precise reasons, caring not a whit about glitz and glamour. Even if you don't take your gambling as seriously as that, you may well want to follow their

example. After all, it's getting harder and harder to find cheap tables (where you can play a hand of blackjack, for example, for less than $10) on the Strip—so take your hard-earned money to where you can lose it more slowly!

You can expect to find in every casino the usual and expected assortment of games—slot machines, of course, video poker, blackjack, table poker (though less and less these days), a race and sports book, a keno lounge, a poker room, baccarat, minibaccarat, Caribbean stud, Let It Ride, craps, roulette, pai gow poker, and more, more, more. If you want a particular game, and it's not one of the most obvious, you might want to call before heading over to a particular casino, just to make sure.

What follows is a description of most of the major casinos in Vegas, including their level of claustrophobia, whether they have a giant slot machine (it's a sucker bet, but we love them), and a completely arbitrary assessment based on whether we won there.

SOUTH STRIP

Excalibur As you might expect, the Excalibur casino is replete with suits of armor, stained-glass panels, knights, dragons, and velvet and satin heraldic banners, with gaming action taking place beneath vast iron-and-gold chandeliers fit for a medieval castle fortress. This all makes it fine for kitsch-seekers, but anyone who hates crowds or is sensitive to noise will hate it. The overall effect is less like a castle and more like a dungeon. 3850 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/597-7777.** www.excalibur.com.

Luxor Las Vegas The Luxor casino has been completely remodeled and additional space gives it a much more airy feel, which gives it a low claustrophobia level—in parts, you can see all the way up the inside of the pyramid. King Tut heads and sphinxes adorn slot areas. There is also a new casino lounge called Aurora, which is very nice. We already felt inclined to like this casino thanks to a good run at blackjack, but the redesign has made it even more inviting. 3900 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/262-4000.** www.luxor.com.

Mandalay Bay "Elegant" gaming in a pre-fab, deliberate way, with a very high ceiling that produces a very low claustrophobia factor. Definitely the right place if you're looking for less hectic, less gimmick-intrusive play. Its layout makes it look airy, and it's marginally less confusing and certainly less overwhelming than many other casinos. Because it is so far down the Strip, there are fewer walk-in players, but the presence of the House of Blues and the

increasing popularity of rumjungle as a nightclub can mean a late-night influx of customers. 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/632-7777.** www.mandalaybay.com.

MGM Grand Las Vegas's largest casino at 171,500 square feet—we've been to countries that were smaller!—is divided into four themed areas, in a futile attempt to make it seem smaller. Many of the *Wizard of Oz* decorations have been removed, but spend an hour in here and you may feel like Dorothy after she got hit by the twister. You will get lost at least once. The sports casino houses a big poker room, a state-of-the-art race and sports book, and the Turf Club Lounge. 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/891-7777.** www.mgmgrand.com.

The Monte Carlo Resort & Casino This place is all huge ceilings and white-light interiors: Obviously, they're trying to evoke gambling in Monaco. While the decor shows lots of attention, it perhaps had too much attention. Bulbs line the ceiling, and everywhere you look is some detail or other. It's busy on both your eyes and your ears. However, there is a large and comfortable race and sports-book area, with its own cocktail lounge. And it's one of the best smelling casinos in town. 3770 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/730-7777.** www.montecarlo.com.

New York–New York Another theme-run-wild place: tuxes on the backs of gaming chairs, change carts that look like yellow cabs, and so forth, all set in a miniature New York City. It's all fabulous fun, but despite a low claustrophobia level (thanks to an unusually high ceiling), it is a major case of sensory overload and is often seriously crowded. This may prove distracting. On the other hand, we won here, so we love it. Serious gamblers understandably may sniff at it all and prefer to take their business to a more seemly casino, but everyone else should have about the most Vegasy time they can. 3790 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/740-6969.** www.nynyhotelcasino.com.

Orleans This is not a particularly special gambling space, though it does have a low claustrophobia level. Another plus is that they sometimes play Cajun and zydeco music over the sound system, so you can two-step while you gamble, which can make losing somewhat less painful. It has all the needed tables—blackjack, craps, and so forth—plus plenty of slots. Because it's popular with locals, there are lots of video-poker options. And because it's not on the Strip, you'll find better odds for craps, and cheaper table minimums. 4500 W. Tropicana Ave. ✆ **702/365-7111.** www.orleanscasino.com.

Tropicana Not quite as good-looking as it once was, and, yes, highly tropical, with gaming tables situated beneath a massive stained-glass archway and Art Nouveau lighting fixtures. In summer it offers something totally unique: swim-up blackjack tables located in the hotel's 5-acre tropical garden and pool area. ***Note:*** Because of the plans to completely renovate the Trop, the casino may be altered or under construction during your stay. 3801 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/739-2222.** www.tropicanalv.com.

MID-STRIP

Bally's Las Vegas Bally's casino is large (the size of a football field), with lots of colorful signage. The big ceiling makes for a low claustrophobia level. The casino hosts frequent slot tournaments, and free gaming lessons are offered. 3645 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/739-4111.** www.ballys.com.

Bellagio The slot machines here are mostly encased in marble and fine woods. How's that for upping the ante on classy? But its relentless good taste means that this is one pretty forgettable casino. After all, we are suckers for a wacky theme that screams "Vegas," and European class just doesn't cut it. Sure, there are good touches—we always like a high ceiling to reduce the claustrophobia index, and the place is laid out in an easy-to-navigate grid with ultrawide aisles, so walking through doesn't seem like such a crowded collision-course maze. And we won big here, so there's that. 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **888/987-6667.** www.bellagio.com.

Caesars Palace Caesars' casino is simultaneously the ultimate in gambling luxury and the ultimate in Vegas kitsch. Cocktail waitresses in togas parade about, as you gamble under the watchful gaze of faux-marble Roman statues. The very high ceiling in certain areas of the casino makes for a very low claustrophobia level, especially thanks to the recent face-lift, which has lightened up the paint and made them much brighter. Unfortunately, some spots in the casino are dark and entirely too claustrophobic. Actually, although we love it, like Caesars itself, the casino has become somewhat confusing and unmanageable because of its size and meandering layout. The casino is famous for its state-of-the-art **Race and Sports Book,** with huge electronic display boards and giant video screens. And the new Pussycat Dolls section (Tues and Fri–Sun 9pm–5am) features hot-pink and black leather tables, nubile dealers dressed in the Dolls' signature scanties, and dancers in cages above, all the better to help you concentrate on your game. Given that table limits start at $50, this

could really be an issue. 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/731-7110.** www.caesars.com.

The Flamingo Las Vegas The casino pretty much looks the same after a years-long renovation, but it might have marginally less confusing and tortuous a layout (trust us, anything is an improvement) with better, and most welcome, access to the street. We have to say that of all the casinos that qualify as older, this is the most pleasant one in which to play. Unfortunately, the gambler seems to be paying for it; no more daytime $3 blackjack. 3555 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/733-3111.** www.flamingolasvegas.com.

Gold Coast Adjacent to the Rio, this casino is not only well lit, but totally unique in Vegas: It has windows! It's a little thing, but it made us really excited. They also have a higher ratio of video-poker machines to slot machines, rather than the other way around. A remodeling made it much bigger, with high ceilings, and very bright overall. Nice job. 4000 W. Flamingo Rd. ✆ **702/367-7111.** www.goldcoastcasino.com.

Harrah's This is a mixed bag of a casino, one that is both dated (low ceilings, old lighting, stuffy) and fun (parts have high-enough ceilings, and there are special attractions). It's also super crowded, noisy, flashy, and claustrophobic. At night, the popular party pit (allegedly fun dealers, rowdy music) packs them in, but the entire place gets crowded by the end of the day. Free gaming lessons are offered on weekdays. 3475 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/369-5000.** www.harrahs.com.

The Mirage The Mirage is more inviting than in its chaotic past, thanks to a design switch from heavy tropics to a more soothing Asian wood accents. But it's still twisting and meandering, and the relatively low ceiling is still a medium claustrophobic issue. This remains one of our favorite places to gamble. The elaborate race and sports book offers theater stereo sound and a movie theater–size screen. It's one of the most pleasant and popular casinos in town, so it's crowded more often than not. 3400 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/791-7111.** www.mirage.com.

Palms Resort & Casino Here's where this Desperately-Seeking-the-Hip hotel has a bit of an identity crisis, because it also wants to mirror those hotels off the Strip where locals feel comfortable gambling. This rarely makes for a chic playing area (because locals don't want to have to get glammed up to go out and play slots). On the

other hand, the area is—especially on weekend nights—ringed with the beautiful and slender and aloof, desperate to get into ghostbar and Rain. Let's hope everyone just keeps getting along. It's actually a pretty fun place to play, so something works. 4321 W. Flamingo Rd. ✆ **702/942-7777.** www.palms.com.

Paris Las Vegas Casino Surrounded by a rather Disney-esque one-third-scale replica of the streets of Paris, this 83,000-square-foot casino is a very pleasant place to gamble, in that Vegas-gimmick kind of way. It's one of those kitschy places that "real" gamblers are appalled by. To heck with them, we say. A tall ceiling gives the illusion that you are trying to bust the bank while strolling outside and results in an airy effect. The place doesn't feel all that large, thanks to its layout. A state-of-the-art race and sports book features live satellite feeds of sporting events from around the world. 3655 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/946-7000.** www.caesars.com.

Planet Hollywood A top-to-bottom remodel of the former Aladdin has newly classed this place up with nary a hint of its former identity. The interior is impressive, classic Hollywood glamour, with plenty of curving lines and dramatic folderol on columns and the like. In sharp contrast to the chaotic entrance, the interior is actually much calmer than it used to be. Check out the imaginative slot toppers. All the usual casino suspects are still around, including thousands of slots, video-poker machines, plenty of table games, a high-limit salon, a poker room, and more. 3667 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/736-0111.** www.aladdincasino.com.

Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino This Brazilian-themed resort's 85,000-square-foot casino is, despite the presence of plenty of glitter and neon, very dark. It has about the highest claustrophobia rating of the major casinos and seems very dated these days. Its sports book feels a little grimy. The waitresses wear scanty costumes (particularly in the back), probably in an effort to distract you and throw your game off. Do not let them. The part of the casino in the new Masquerade Village is considerably more pleasant (the very high ceilings help), though still crowded, plus the loud live show adds even more noise. There are nonsmoking slot and gaming table areas. 3700 W. Flamingo Rd. ✆ **702/252-7777.** www.harrahs.com.

TI–Treasure Island We really loved it when this place was a casino set in Disneyland's Pirates of the Caribbean—or so it seemed. It doesn't seem like a big deal, the loss of those pirate chests dripping gold, jewels, and skulls with eye patches, but with the removal of the

theme, this is now just a very nice casino. But it is that, so you should come here. There are nonsmoking gaming tables in each pit. A race and sports book boasts state-of-the-art electronic information boards and TV monitors at every seat, as well as numerous large-screen monitors. 3300 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/894-7111.** www.treasureisland.com.

The Venetian "Tasteful" is the watchword in these days of classy Vegas gaming, and The Venetian's casino is interchangeable with those found at other high-end spots. All that gleaming marble, columns, and such is very nice, but after a while, it's also a bit ho-hum. Besides, this is Vegas, and we want our tacky theme elements. The lack thereof, combined with poor signage, may be why this casino is so hard to get around—every part looks exactly the same. It's not precisely claustrophobic, but it can be confusing. On the other hand, we made a killing at blackjack and my editor struck it rich at the slots, so we have to love the place for those reasons. The smoke-sensitive report that the ventilation system here seems to be tops. 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/414-1000.** www.venetian.com.

NORTH STRIP

Circus Circus This vast property has three full-size casinos that, combined, compose one of the largest gaming operations in Nevada (more than 100,000 sq. ft.). More importantly, they have an entire circus midway set up throughout, so you are literally gambling with trapeze stunts going on over your head. Unfortunately, the casino is crowded and noisy, and there are lots of children passing through. That, plus some low ceilings (not in the Big Top, obviously), makes for a very high claustrophobia rating, though the current commedia dell'arte clown motif (as opposed to the old garish circus motif) has upgraded the decor. 2880 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/734-0410.** www.circuscircus.com.

The Riviera The Riviera's 100,000-square-foot casino, one of the largest in the world, offers plenty of opportunities to get lost and cranky. A wall of windows lets daylight stream in (most unusual), but as the hotel gets shabbier, every inch of the casino smells like smoke and age. Nickeltown is just that—nothin' but nickel slots and video poker. 2901 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/734-5110.** www.rivierahotel.com.

Sahara This is one place where there seem to be more tables than slots and video-poker machines. It's also one of the few Strip casinos that offer low-rollers good deals such as $1 craps and blackjack. But

belligerent drunks and other fun-killing folks are often found at these $1 tables. Still, we made a killing at blackjack, so now we love this place again. (What? We told you it was entirely arbitrary!). The Sahara runs frequent slot tournaments and other events. 2535 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/737-2111.** www.saharavegas.com.

Stratosphere Casino Hotel & Tower Originally set up to evoke a world's fair but ending up more like a circus, Stratosphere redid its entire casino area to make it more appealing to the many adults who were staying away in droves. This should lure many of you because it is a nicer, and less crowded, place to play. They heavily advertise their good odds: single deck blackjack, single-zero roulette, and 10-times odds on craps. We can't say we noticed a difference, but other people around us were winning like crazy. 2000 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/380-7777.** www.stratospherehotel.com.

Wynn Las Vegas Sprawling off the registration and conservatory/atrium/garden walkway, this looks like every other casino in a good-taste Vegas hotel and thus is instantly forgettable. Excessive geometric detailing on the ceiling gives it the illusion of lower height and so delivers a medium-high claustrophobia rating. It's also perhaps the quietest of the major casinos, which is kind of a good thing. Since this is a Grown-Up Place, playfulness is mostly missing—no machines with gimmicky and squeal-inducing sounds (never mind a Big Giant Slot Machine), though we did overhear at least one slap-happy craps dealer exhorting his customers in a party-hearty way. All the games you could want, plus a poker room and the rest, are here, though good luck finding a blackjack table under $15 a hand. And we aren't just saying that because we remain bitter about that losing streak at blackjack. 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/770-7700.** www.wynnlasvegas.com.

EAST OF THE STRIP

Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Where Gen X goes to gamble. The Hard Rock has certainly taken casino decor to a whole new level. Gaming tables have piano keyboards at one end; some slots have Fender guitar fretboards as arms; gaming chips have band names and/or pictures on them; slot machines are similarly rock-themed (check out the Jimi Hendrix machine!); and so it goes. Rock blares over the sound system, allowing boomers to boogie while they gamble. All this is genuinely amazing, but the noise level is above even that of a normal casino and we just hated it. We are in the minority, though; most people love it, so assume you will be one of them. 4455 Paradise Rd. ✆ **702/693-5000.** www.hardrockhotel.com.

Las Vegas Hilton The casino has two parts, thanks to the space-themed portion adjacent to *Star Trek: The Experience.* In an area designed to look like a spaceport, you find space-themed slot machines, many of which have no handles—just pass your hand through a light beam to activate. We do like a well-designed space in which to lose our money.

Over in the original casino section, Austrian crystal chandeliers add a strong touch of class. The casino is actually medium-size, but it does have—at 30,500 square feet—the world's largest race and sports book facility. It, too, is a luxurious precinct equipped with the most advanced audio, video, and computer technology available. In fact, its video wall is second in size only to NASA's. The casino is adjacent to the lobby but is neither especially loud nor frantic. 3000 Paradise Rd. ✆ **702/732-7111.** www.lvhilton.com.

Sam's Town On its two immense floors of gaming action (153,083 sq. ft., second only to the MGM Grand in size), Sam's Town maintains the friendly, just-folks ambience that characterizes the entire property. The casino is adorned with Old West paraphernalia (horseshoes, Winchester rifles, holsters, and saddlebags) and is looking a bit less dated thanks to some recent sprucing up (it's subtle, but believe us, it's better). Sam's Town claims its friendliness extends to looser slots (not that my editor noticed). Free gaming lessons are offered weekdays from 11am to 4pm, with poker lessons at other times. 5111 Boulder Hwy. (at Nellis Blvd.). ✆ **702/456-7777.** www.samstownlv.com.

DOWNTOWN

Binion's *Finds* Benny Binion could neither read nor write, but, boy, did he know how to run a casino. His venerable establishment has been eclipsed over the years, but it claims the highest betting limits in Las Vegas on all games (probably in the entire world, according to a spokesperson). Unfortunately, its last couple of years read like a Vegas soap opera—you know, in-family fighting, murder of one scion at the (alleged) hands of his stripper girlfriend, another taking out many of the elements that made Binion's famous, and the whole thing getting shuttered in early 2004 thanks to nonpayment of bills. After 3 months, the casino reopened, thanks to its dual owners, one of which was Harrah's, which managed it for a year before running off with the Horseshoe name and the rights to Binion's famous World Series of Poker.

Do you care about any of this? Maybe. Binion's has about 400 fewer slot machines than it used to, and some parts got painted, so

it looks less dingy, but remains otherwise essentially the same. That includes the relatively high claustrophobia level. It offers single-deck blackjack and $2 minimums, 10-times odds on craps, and high progressive jackpots. Real gamblers still won't consider going anywhere else. 128 E. Fremont St. (between Casino Center Blvd. and 1st St.). ✆ **702/382-1600.** www.binions.com.

California Hotel & Casino The California is a festive place filled with Hawaiian shirts and balloons. This friendly facility actually provides sofas and armchairs in the casino area—an unheard-of luxury in this town. This is the first place we found our favorite Piggy Bankin' machines. 12 Ogden Ave. (at 1st St.). ✆ **702/385-1222.** www.thecal.com.

El Cortez One of the last shreds of pre-1980s Las Vegas, this old gal just got a fantastic new face-lift, with an appeal based less on kitsch and more natural. By removing half the slot machines, the casino has been opened up and aired out. Plus, they gave it more contemporary decor. And local legend Jackie Gaughin (who lives in the penthouse) wanders through at least once a day. It features frequent big-prize drawings and special events designed to bring the locals in. It's also popular for low limits (10¢ roulette and 25¢ craps). 600 Fremont St. (between 6th and 7th sts.). ✆ **702/385-5200.** www.elcortezhotelcasino.com.

Fitzgeralds This casino is done up in greens and golds, and the overall effect is not quite as tacky as you might expect. In fact, it's rather friendly and with a medium-to-low claustrophobia level. The casino actually has two levels: From the upstairs part, you can access a balcony from which you get an up-close view of the Fremont Street Experience. Blackjack, craps, and keno tournaments are frequent events here. Fun books provide two-for-one gaming coupons, and there are $1-minimum blackjack tables. 301 Fremont St. (at 3rd St.). ✆ **702/388-2400.** www.fitzgeraldslasvegas.com.

Four Queens The Four Queens is New Orleans–themed, with late-19th-century-style globe chandeliers, which make for good lighting and a low claustrophobia level. It's small, but the dealers are helpful, which is one of the pluses of gambling in the more manageably sized casinos. Slots tournaments are frequent events, and there are major poker tournaments throughout the year. The casino also offers exciting multiple-action blackjack (it's like playing three hands at once, with separate wagers on each). 202 Fremont St. (at Casino Center Blvd.). ✆ **702/385-4011.** www.fourqueens.com.

Fremont Hotel & Casino This 32,000-square-foot casino offers a relaxed atmosphere and low gambling limits ($2 blackjack, 25¢ roulette). It's also surprisingly open and bright for a Downtown casino. Just 50¢ could win you a Cadillac or Ford Mustang here, plus a progressive cash jackpot. Casino guests can take part in frequent slot and keno tournaments. No giant slot machine, though. 200 E. Fremont St. (between Casino Center Blvd. and 3rd St.). ✆ **702/385-3232.**

Golden Nugget While this is not the standout, it's still one of the nicest places to gamble, looks-wise, in Downtown. (We prefer Main Street Station, but you might prefer the more obvious attempts at class that this place exudes.) The new owners have given it a gorgeous makeover, all rich tones with splashes of color, and it's now even nicer than ever. Some tables are only $5 minimum, at least during the day. And compared to most other Downtown properties, this is the most like the Strip. Look for more improvements from the new owners. 129 E. Fremont St. (at Casino Center Blvd.). ✆ **702/385-7111.** www.goldennugget.com.

Main Street Station *Finds* This is the best of the Downtown casinos, at least in terms of comfort and a pleasant environment. Even the Golden Nugget, nice as it is, has more noise and distractions. The decor here is, again, classic Vegas/old-timey (Victorian-era) San Francisco, but with extra touches (check out the old-fashioned fans above the truly beautiful bar) that make it work much better than other attempts at the same decor. Strangely, it seems just about smoke-free, perhaps thanks in part to a very high ceiling. The claustrophobia level is zero. 200 N. Main St. (between Fremont St. and I-95). ✆ **702/387-1896.** www.mainstreetcasino.com.

7 Shopping

Shopping in Vegas—Nirvana or an endless Sisyphean repetition of every mall you've ever been to? Depends on your viewpoint. If you're looking for quaint, clever, unique stores, this isn't the town for you. But if you are looking for general shop-'til-you-drop fun, this is your kind of town. In addition to some extensive malls, many hotels have comprehensive, and sometimes highly themed, shopping arcades, most notably Caesars Palace, Planet Hollywood, and The Venetian (details below).

In addition to exploring the malls, outlets, and shops listed below, you might consider driving **Maryland Parkway,** which runs parallel to the Strip on the east and has just about one of everything: several major department stores, Target, major drugstores (in case you forgot your shampoo and don't want to spend $8 on a new bottle in your hotel sundry shop), some alternative-culture stores (tattoo parlors and hip clothing stores), and so forth. It goes on for blocks.

1 The Malls

Boulevard Mall The Boulevard's 150-plus stores and restaurants are arranged in arcade fashion on a single floor occupying 1.2 million square feet. Geared to the average consumer, it has such anchors as Sears, JCPenney, Macy's, Dillard's, and Marshalls. There's a wide variety of shops offering all sorts of items—moderately priced shoes and clothing for the entire family, books and gifts, jewelry, and home furnishings. There are also more than a dozen fast-food eateries. In short, you can find just about anything you need here. And there's free valet parking. The mall is open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 9pm and Sunday from 11am to 6pm. 3528 S. Maryland Pkwy. (between Twain Ave. and Desert Inn Rd.). ✆ **702/732-8949.** www.blvdmall.com.

Fashion Show ★★ What was a nondescript, if large, mall has now been revamped with a *yowsa* exterior much more fitting Las Vegas. It's capped by a giant . . . well . . . they call it a "cloud," but we call it "that weird thingy that looks like a spaceport for UFOs.

What in the heck were they thinking?" Inside, it's still, more or less, a basic mall, including the city's first Nordstrom, a Bloomingdale's, Saks Fifth Avenue, a Neiman Marcus, and other high-end retailers. The mall hosts more than 250 shops, restaurants, and services. And the cloud/alien spaceport thingy has giant LED screens, music, and other distractions—again, much more fitting for Vegas, where even the malls have to light up. Valet parking is available, and you can even arrange to have your car hand-washed while you shop. It's open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 9pm and Sunday from 11am to 7pm. 3200 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (at the corner of Spring Mountain Rd.). ✆ **702/369-0704.** www.thefashionshow.com.

The Galleria at Sunset ★ This is the farthest away mall of the bunch (9 miles southeast of Downtown Las Vegas, in Henderson) but the most aesthetically pleasing, a 1-million-square-foot Southwestern-themed shopping center. Anchored by Dillard's, JCPenney, Mervyn's California, and Macy's, The Galleria's 140 emporia include branches of Ann Taylor, bebe, Caché, Victoria's Secret, The Body Shop, B. Dalton, and Sam Goody. In addition to shoes and clothing for the entire family, you'll find electronics, eyewear, gifts, books, home furnishings, jewelry, and luggage here. Dining facilities include an extensive food court and two restaurants. Open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 9pm and Sunday from 11am to 7pm. 1300 W. Sunset Rd. (at Stephanie St., just off I-15), Henderson. ✆ **702/434-0202.** www.galleriaatsunset.com.

Meadows Mall ★ Another immense mall, this one has more than 144 shops, services, and eateries, anchored by four department stores: Macy's, Dillard's, Sears, and JCPenney. In addition, there are more than a dozen shoe stores, a full array of apparel for the entire family (including maternity wear, petites, and large sizes), an extensive food court, and shops purveying toys, books, music, luggage, gifts, jewelry, home furnishings, accessories, and so on. Fountains and trees enhance Meadows Mall's ultramodern, high-ceilinged interior, and there are a few comfortable seating areas for resting your feet a moment. The Meadows Mall is open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 9pm and Sunday from 10am to 6pm. 4300 Meadows Lane (at the intersection of Valley View and U.S. 95). ✆ **702/878-3331.** www.meadowsmall.com.

Showcase Mall ★ Less a traditional mall than an entertainment center, it has plenty of shopping and fun—we rarely miss a chance to drop by M&M's World. Other occupants include GameWorks,

the World of Coca-Cola store, Grand Canyon Experience, and the United Artists theaters—the only regular movie theater complex on the Strip. Hours vary by store. 3785 S. Las Vegas Blvd. (right next to the MGM Grand). ✆ **702/597-3122.**

2 Factory Outlets

Las Vegas has a big factory-outlet center just a few miles past the southern end of the Strip (see below). If you don't have a car, you can take a no. 301 CAT bus from anywhere on the Strip and change at Vacation Village to a no. 303. You can see from the review below that it doesn't do much for us, which is why we usually head to Primm to drop more money than we do at the tables (Williams-Sonoma outlet, how we love you).

Fashion Outlets Las Vegas ★★★ Dedicated bargain hunters (we stop here every time we drive by) may want to make the roughly 40-minute drive along I-15 to this big outlet complex, right on the border of California and Nevada. (There's also a shuttle from the MGM Grand or the mall at Planet Hollywood. Round-trip fare is $15 and includes a savings book for discounts at the outlets; check the website for a shuttle discount coupon.) On your left is a large factory outlet with some designer names prominent enough to make the trip worthwhile—Kenneth Cole, Versace, Coach, Banana Republic, even a rare Williams-Sonoma, among several others. Why so far out of town? Our guess is because some of these companies have full-price boutiques in various hotels and malls, and they don't want you ignoring those in favor of discounted items. Open daily from 10am to 8pm. 32100 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **888/424-6898.** www.fashionoutletlasvegas.com.

Las Vegas Outlet Center ★ Formerly Belz Outlet Center, this massive complex houses 130 air-conditioned outlets, including a few dozen clothing stores and shoe stores. It offers a range of merchandise, but even with our understanding of the hit-and-miss nature of outlets, we never buy anything here and feel nothing but apathy for the center. Among other stores (which you will perhaps find less disappointing than we have), you'll find Liz Claiborne, Perry Ellis, Ashworth-Callaway Golf, Levi's, Nike, Oshkosh B'Gosh, Gymboree, Reebok, Jockey, Springmaid, Danskin, Van Heusen, Tommy Hilfiger, Burlington, Royal Doulton, Waterford (crystal), Black & Decker (tools), and Calvin Klein. There are also a carousel and a food court. Hours vary by store. 7400 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (at Warm Springs Rd.). ✆ **702/896-5599.** www.premiumoutlets.com.

Las Vegas Premium Outlets We had such high hopes for this, the most conveniently located, and largest, outlet mall in Las Vegas. We can say that it looks nice, in that pretty outdoor mall kind of way. But the key here is "outdoor." It's fine on a regular day, but on a hot Vegas day—and there are plenty of those—this is an open oven of misery. They should at least install a whole bunch of misters. You'll roast away while shopping among disappointingly dull stores, some of which are "outlets" only because they aren't in regular malls. (The Bath & Body Works shop, for example, consists mostly of regular products at regular prices.) Bring a lot of water if you go during the summer. (***Warning:*** Parking here is often a nightmare, and it will only get worse as construction of a major expansion gets into gear during 2007. Consider taking a cab.) Stores include Armani, Bernini, Brooks Brothers, Calvin Klein, Coach, Crabtree & Evelyn, Dolce & Gabbana, Kenneth Cole, Lacoste, Nike, Perry Ellis, Ralph Lauren, Quicksilver, Samsonite, Timberland, Tommy Hilfiger, Wilson's Leather, and Zales. Open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 9pm, Sunday from 10am to 8pm. 875 S. Grand Central Pkwy. (at I-15). ✆ **702/474-7500.** www.premiumoutlets.com.

3 Hotel Shopping Arcades

Just about every Las Vegas hotel offers some shopping opportunities. The following have the most extensive arcades. The physical spaces of these shopping arcades are always open, but individual stores keep unpredictable hours.

Note: The Forum Shops at Caesars, the Grand Canal Shoppes at The Venetian, and the Miracle Mile at Planet Hollywood—as much sightseeing attractions as shopping arcades—are in the must-see category.

BELLAGIO ★★ The **Via Bellagio** collection of stores isn't as big as some of the other megahotel shopping arcades, but here it's definitely quality over quantity. It's a veritable roll call of glossy magazine ads: Armani, Prada, Chanel, Tiffany, Hermès, Fred Leighton, Gucci, Dior, and Yves Saint Laurent. That's about it. You need anything else? Well, yes—money. If you can afford this stuff, good for you, you lucky dog. (A nice touch is a parking lot by the far entrance to Via Bellagio, so you need not navigate the great distance from Bellagio's main parking structure; instead, you can simply pop in and pick up a little something.)

CAESARS PALACE ★★★ Since 1978, Caesars has had an impressive arcade of shops called the **Appian Way,** highlighted by

an immense white Carrara-marble replica of Michelangelo's *David* standing more than 18 feet high. All in all, a respectable grouping of hotel shops. But in the hotel's tradition of constantly surpassing itself, in 1992 Caesars inaugurated the fabulous **Forum Shops,** an independently operated 375,000-square-foot Rodeo-Drive-meets-the-Roman-Empire affair complete with a 48-foot triumphal arch entryway, a painted Mediterranean sky that changes as the day progresses from rosy-tinted dawn to twinkling evening stars, acres of marble, lofty Corinthian columns with gold capitals, and a welcoming goddess of fortune under a central dome. Then there is the Festival Fountain, where some seemingly immovable "marble" animatronic statues of Bacchus (slightly in his cups), a lyre-playing Apollo, Plutus, and Venus come to life for a 7-minute revel with dancing waters and high-tech laser-light effects. The shows take place every hour on the hour. The entire thing is pretty incredible, but also very Vegas—particularly the Bacchus show, which is truly bizarre. Even if you don't like shopping, it's worth the stroll just to giggle.

In 1998 The Forum Shops added an extension. The centerpiece is a giant **Roman Hall,** featuring a 50,000-gallon circular aquarium and another fountain that also comes to life with a show involving fire (don't stand too close—it gets really hot), dancing waters, and animatronic figures, as the mythical continent of Atlantis rises and falls every hour. The production values are much higher than those of the Bacchus extravaganza, but this "performance" takes itself more seriously, so the giggle factor remains. A 2004 expansion upped an already high ante. The three-story addition tacked on a new Strip entryway complete with a deliriously audacious circular escalator and another 175,000 square feet of retail space. The multistoried extension tries to permanently move past "kitsch" and into "classy rich person's shopping experience"—though any sort of movement, literal or metaphoric, is tricky, what with all the giant marbled pillars, statues and fountains, plus an atrium that actually admits sunlight.

So with all the gawking opportunities, it may be easy to forget that there are actually stores here where you can shop and buy things. Tenants are mostly of the exclusive variety, although there are a few more Average Joe kind of stores (yes, of course there's a Gap). Some examples: Louis Vuitton, Bernini, Christian Dior, Christian Lacroix, A/X Armani Exchange, Nanette Lapore (drop-dead cute clothing with only a handful of stores worldwide), Gucci, Gianni

Versace, Harry Winston, Brooks Brothers, Juicy Couture, Taryn Rose, a Playboy store, Kiehl's cosmetics (worth a trip just for that), FAO Schwarz (complete with two-story horse towering over the entrance), and Vosges Haut Chocolate!

The majority of the Caesars Palace shops are open Sunday through Thursday from 10am to 11pm, Friday and Saturday from 10am to midnight.

EXCALIBUR For the most part, the shops of **The Realm** reflect the hotel's medieval theme. Dragon's Lair, for example, features items ranging from pewter swords and shields to full suits of armor, plus crystal balls and the like. Other shops carry more conventional wares—gifts, candy, jewelry, women's clothing, and Excalibur logo items. And most importantly, they have a branch of that medieval staple—Krispy Kreme Doughnuts!

HARRAH'S ✪ **Carnaval Court** is a small outdoor shopping promenade, a concept unique to the Strip. It consists mostly of little stalls selling bits and bobs, like hippie-inspired floaty dresses and tops, saucy underwear with catchy phrases on it, jewelry, and knock-off purses. A store highlight is a Ghirardelli chocolate shop, a branch of the famous San Francisco–based chocolate company. It's remarkably like a smaller version of the one in San Francisco, and in addition to candy, you can get a variety of delicious sundaes and other ice-cream treats.

MANDALAY PLACE ✪ In appearance, more like an actual indoor mall than a hotel shopping arcade, but in content it is neither the rarified atmosphere of Via Bellagio or the Wynn Promenade, nor does it have the collection of the Forum Shops. But there a bookstore (a rare entry), a men's shop called The Art of Shaving, a great wine store, a shop for way-too-pampered pets (Lush Puppy), and a superior chocolatier.

MIRACLE MILE SHOPS AT PLANET HOLLYWOOD ✪✪ To our dismay, our favorite hotel-related shopping area is currently undergoing a $50-million total redo. The one-time Desert Passage, all Middle Eastern souk–themed, is getting made over with some vague "Miracle Mile" theme meant to invoke every high-end shopping district in any major metropolis. (Note to designers: L.A.'s own Miracle Mile lost its luster years ago—way to be on top of the trends.) The result isn't even all that glamorous: It's pretty much every nice upper-end mall in America, a generic letdown all the worse because the original version was so charming. The one bright

spot may be the upcoming "water feature" in the form of a reflecting pool with sheets of water on which various shows will be projected.

At least the shops somewhat stand out, including several listed separately below, plus a Showcase Slots (where you can bring home your own one-armed bandit), Frederick's of Hollywood, Crocs, Two Lips Shoes (affordable stylish and comfortable shoes), Steve Madden, Ann Taylor, Urban Outfitters, bebe, BCBG, Sephora, and probably by the time you read this, the first Vegas introduction of the insanely popular H&M clothing store. You can also get your Tiki on at a branch of L.A.'s late, lamented Trader Vic's restaurant, not to mention all kinds of loud big-screens and other electronic gizmos because that's the way Vegas is these days. Interior changes have continued throughout 2007. For information, see **www.miracle mileshopslv.com**.

The shops are open Sunday through Thursday from 10am to 11pm, Friday and Saturday from 10am to midnight.

RIO The 60,000-square-foot **Masquerade Village** is a nicely executed shopping arcade at Rio. It's done as a European village, and is two stories tall, featuring a wide variety of shops, mostly selling clothes, jewelry, and gifts. One notable outlet is Nawlins, which includes "authentic" voodoo items, Mardi Gras masks, and so forth.

STRATOSPHERE The internationally themed (though in a high-school production kind of way, compared to what's over at Planet Hollywood and The Venetian) second-floor **Tower Shops** promenade, housing more than 40 stores, is entered via an escalator from the casino. Some shops are in "Paris," along the Rue Lafayette and Avenue de l'Opéra (there are replicas of the Eiffel Tower and Arc de Triomphe in this section). Others occupy Hong Kong and New York City streetscapes.

TI–TREASURE ISLAND TI's shopping promenade is nowhere near as interesting since they took out all the pirate-themed bits. Emporia here include the TI Store (your basic hotel gift/sundry shop, also offering much pirate-themed merchandise) plus the *Sirens of TI* themed lingerie shop. Cirque du Soleil and *Mystère* logo wares are also sold in a shop near the ticket office in the hotel.

THE VENETIAN ★★ After you've shopped Ancient Rome at Caesars, come to **The Grand Canal Shoppes** and see if shopping in Renaissance- (more or less) era Venice is any different. Certainly the production values stay high: This is a re-created Italian village, complete with a painted, cloud-studded blue sky overhead, and a canal

right down the center on which gondoliers float and sing. Pay them ($15), and you can take a lazy float down and back, serenaded by your boatman (actors hired especially for this purpose and with accents perfect enough to fool Roberto Benigni). As you pass by, under, and over bridges, flower girls will serenade you and courtesans will flirt with you, and you may have an encounter with a famous Venetian or two, as Marco Polo discusses his travels and Casanova exerts his famous charm. The stroll (or float) ends at a miniature (though not by all that much) version of St. Mark's Square, the central landmark of Venice. Here, you'll find opera singers, strolling musicians, glass blowers, and other bustling marketplace activity. It's all most ambitious and beats the heck out of animatronic statues.

The Shoppes are accessible directly from outside (so you don't have to navigate miles of casino and other clutter), via a grand staircase whose ceiling features more of those impressive hand-painted art recreations. It's quite smashing. The Venetian's Palazzo hotel addition, due to open in late 2007, will eventually adjoin the Shoppes at the far end of St. Mark's Square (and include a branch of Barneys New York).

Oh, the shops themselves? The usual high- and medium-end brand names: Jimmy Choo, Mikimoto, Movado, Davidoff, Kenneth Cole, Ann Taylor, BCBG, bebe, Banana Republic, Rockport, and more, plus Venetian glass and paper shops. Madame Tussauds Las Vegas (p. 106) is also located here, and so is the Canyon Ranch Spa Club. The shops are open Sunday through Thursday from 10am to 11pm, Friday and Saturday from 10am to midnight.

WYNN LAS VEGAS ★★ The **Esplanade** is along the same rarified lines of the Bellagio shopping area, in that it's a Euro-style-esque (love those Vegas qualifiers!) shopping street lined with pricey places with famous names—Chanel, Cartier, Dior, Judith Leiber, Jean Paul Gaultier, Manolo Blahnik, Oscar de la Renta (his only store outside of NYC), La Flirt (a sort of mini-Sephora), Chocolat (excellent pastries and gourmet chocolates), and Jo Malone. We prefer it some to the one at Bellagio because it seems like it has just enough shops (like La Flirt) that nearly reach an average person's budget.

4 Souvenirs

The **Arts Factory Complex** ★★★, 103 E. Charleston Blvd. (✆ **702/382-3886**), is full of galleries of local artists working in a variety of different mediums, and one of their works would make for an original souvenir.

If you prefer your souvenirs to be a little less class and a little more kitsch, head over to the **Bonanza Gift and Souvenir Shop** ★★, 2460 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (✆ **702/384-0005**). It's the self-proclaimed "World's Largest Gift Shop," and it certainly is big. T-shirts, Native American "handicrafts," all kinds of playing cards, both new and used (casinos have to change decks frequently, so this is where used packs go), dice, things covered in rhinestones, snowglobes—in short, something for everyone, provided "everyone" has a certain sensibility. We looked, and we felt the tackiest item available was the pair of earrings made out of poker chips. The coolest? Some inexpensive, old-fashioned-style dice.

For reverent camp, encrusted with sequins, take a peek at the **Liberace Museum gift store** ★★, 1775 E. Tropicana Ave. (✆ **702/798-5595**). Encourage them to get even more out there (don't you think they should add Liberace mouse pads and screen savers?). For mixed emotions, little can beat items emblazoned with vintage images of bomb tests and other glories to the good old days of atomic blasts, at the **Atomic Testing Museum gift store** ★★, 755 E. Flamingo Rd. (✆ **702/794-5161**).

5 Las Vegas Specialty Stores

Gambler's Book Shop ★ Here you can buy a book on any system ever devised to beat casino odds. Owner Edna Luckman carries more than 4,000 gambling-related titles, including many out-of-print books, computer software, and videotapes. She describes her store as a place where "gamblers, writers, researchers, statisticians, and computer specialists can meet and exchange information." On request, knowledgeable clerks provide on-the-spot expert advice on handicapping the ponies and other aspects of sports betting. The store's motto is "knowledge is protection." Open Monday through Saturday from 9am to 5pm. 630 S. 11th St. (just off Charleston Blvd.). ✆ **800/522-1777** or 702/382-7555. www.gamblersbook.com.

Gamblers General Store ★ This is a gambler's paradise stocked with a massive book collection, antique and current slot machines, gaming tables (blackjack, craps, and so on), roulette wheels, collectible chips, casino dice, classic Vegas photos, and a ton of gaming-related souvenirs. Open daily from 9am to 6pm. 800 S. Main St. (Downtown). ✆ **800/322-2447** or 702/382-9903. www.gamblersgeneralstore.com.

6 Candy

M&M's World ★★ *Kids* What can one do when faced with a wall of M&Ms in colors never before seen by man or woman (purple! teal! lime green!)? Overpriced? Yeah! Who cares? There are doodads galore, replete with the M&M's logo, and a surprisingly enjoyable short film and comedy routine, ostensibly about the "history" of the candy but really just a cute little adventure with a decent budget behind it. Open Sunday through Thursday from 9am until 11pm, Friday and Saturday from 9am until midnight. In the Showcase Mall, 3785 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (just north of the MGM Grand Hotel). ✆ **702/736-7611.**

7 Antiques

Antiques in Vegas? You mean really old slot machines, or the people playing the really old slot machines?

Actually, Vegas has quite a few antiques stores—nearly two dozen—of consistent quality and price, nearly all located within a few blocks of each other. We have one friend, someone who takes interior design very seriously, who comes straight to Vegas for most of her best finds. (You should see her antique chandelier collection!)

To get to this antiquing mecca, start in the middle of the **1600 block of East Charleston Boulevard** and keep driving east. The little stores, nearly all in old houses dating from the '30s, line each side of the street. Or you can stop in at **Silver Horse Antiques,** 1651 E. Charleston Blvd. (✆ **702/385-2700**), and pick up a map to almost all of the locations, with phone numbers and hours of operation.

Antiques at the Market ★ This is a newer antiques minimall (for lack of a better phrase) with a number of individuals operating stalls under one roof. Open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 6pm, Sunday from noon to 5pm. 6665 S. Eastern Ave. (between Sunset and Warm Springs Rd.). ✆ **702/307-3960.**

Antique Square ★ It's a cruddy-looking collection of stores in several remodeled houses arranged in a square, but every good antiques shopper knows that these kinds of crammed junk stores are the places to find real treasures and to do real antiques hunting (because once they've been really picked through and prettily displayed by pros, you can kiss bargains and real finds goodbye). Individual store hours vary, but most are closed on Sunday and Monday. 2014–2034 E. Charleston Blvd. (at Eastern Ave.). ✆ **702/471-6500.**

Red Rooster Antique Mall ✪ The Red Rooster is a minimall of sorts, only with "antiques" instead of a 7-Eleven and a nail salon. The place is older and battered, but features individual stalls selling all categories of stuff, from junk to treasures. Individual store hours vary, but most are open Monday through Saturday 10am to 6pm, Sunday from 11am to 5pm. 1109 Western Ave. (at Charleston and I-15). ✆ **702/382-5253.**

8 Wigs

Serge's Showgirl Wigs ✪ Oh, you probably thought all those showgirls just naturally had bountiful thick manes. Sorry to burst your bubble. If you have a desire to look like a showgirl yourself (and why not?), come to Serge's, which for over 2 decades has been supplying Vegas's wiggy needs, with more than 2,000 wigs to choose from. This, by the way, is not just for showgirls or the similarly delusional. Not only can wigs be fun for everyone (we treasure our own turquoise number), but at least one sassy gal we know with thinning hair issues recently bought two natural-looking models and reports that the sales staff was as nice and helpful as could be. Wigs range in price from $130 to over $1,500, depending on quality and realness, and you can pick from Dolly Parton's wig line or get something custom-made. They also make hairpieces and toupees and carry hair-care products. Open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 5:30pm.

If the prices at Serge's are too rich to bring your fantasy alive, right across the way is **Serge's Showgirl Wigs outlet,** with prices running from a more reasonable $60 to $70. 953 E. Sahara Ave., no. A-2. ✆ **800/947-9447** or 702/732-1015. www.showgirlwigs.com.

8

Las Vegas After Dark

You will not lack for things to do at night in Vegas. This is a town that truly comes alive only after dark. Just look at the difference between the Strip during the day, when it's kind of dingy and nothing special, and at night when the lights hit and the place glows in all its glory. Night is when it's happening in this 24-hour town. In fact, most bars and clubs don't even get going until close to midnight.

But you also won't lack for things to do before 11pm. There are shows all over town, though traditional variety and magic shows have largely given way to Cirque du Soleil. The showgirls remain, topless and otherwise, but the current trend is toward Big Name Headliners and Big Broadway Productions.

Every hotel has at least one lounge, usually offering live music. But the days of fabulous Vegas lounge entertainment, when the lounge acts were sometimes of better quality than the headliners (and headliners like Sinatra would join the lounge acts on stage between their own sets), are gone. Most of what remains is homogeneous and bland, and serves best as a brief respite or background noise. On the other hand, finding the most awful lounge act in town can be a rewarding pursuit of its own.

Vegas still attracts some dazzling headliner entertainment in its showrooms and arenas. Madonna's 2006 shows commanded the top prices on her tour; U2 started their PopMart tour at UNLV's stadium; the Rolling Stones played both the MGM Grand and the Hard Rock Hotel's The Joint; Pavarotti inaugurated Mandalay Bay's Arena, and Bob Dylan did the same for the House of Blues; Cher opened up The Venetian, and Sting got a reported $1 million to open Red Rock Resort with a 60-minute set. It is still a badge of honor for comedians to play Vegas, and there is almost always someone of marquee value playing one showroom or the other.

Admission to shows runs the gamut, from about $25 for Mac King (comedy magic show at Harrah's) to $200 and more for top headliners. Prices occasionally include two drinks or, in rare instances, dinner.

To find out who's performing during your stay and for up-to-date listings of shows (prices change, shows close), you can call the various hotels, using their toll-free numbers. Or call the **Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority** (✆ **877/VISIT-LV** or 702/892-0711; www.visitlasvegas.com) and ask them to send you a free copy of *Showguide* or *What's On in Las Vegas* (one or both of which will probably be in your hotel room). You can also check out what's playing at **www.visitlasvegas.com**. It's best to plan well ahead if you have your heart set on seeing one of the most popular shows or catching a major headliner.

If you prefer alternative or real rock music, your choices used to be limited, but that's all changed. Most touring rock bands make at least once stop in the city, so that means you can actually see such folks as Marilyn Manson and Beck in Vegas. But otherwise, the alternative club scene in town is no great shakes. If you want to know what's playing during your stay, consult the local free alternative papers: the ***Las Vegas Weekly*** (biweekly, with great club and bar descriptions in their listings; on the web at www.lasvegasweekly.com), and ***City Life*** (weekly, with no descriptions but comprehensive listings of what's playing where all over town; www.lasvegascitylife.com). Both can be picked up at restaurants, bars, record and music stores, and hip retail stores.

In addition to the listings below, consider the **Fremont Street Experience,** described on p. 101.

Note: There is a curfew law in Vegas: Anyone under 18 is forbidden from being on the Strip without a parent after 9pm on weekends and holidays. In the rest of the county, minors cannot be out without parents after 10pm on school nights, and midnight on weekends.

1 The Major Production Shows

This category covers all the major Las Vegas production shows and a few of the minor ones as well. In addition to the following, we recommend **Toni Braxton's** divalicious show at Harrah's and **Louie Anderson's** comic stylings at Excalibur, but we urge you to stay away from the musical family the **Scintas** at the Sahara—a fossilized Vegas act full of near-parody-level lounge singing and jokes at the expense of every ethnicity, handicap, and sexual orientation out there.

There is also a new trend of major headliners doing semipermanent but irregular stints in the big showrooms. If you are in town when **Elton John** is performing *The Red Piano* on Bette Midler's off

Tips Our Favorites

Our vote for **best show?** It's a tossup between *KÀ* at the MGM Grand, *O* at Bellagio, and *Mystère* at TI–Treasure Island, all by Cirque du Soleil. Each has to be seen to be believed—and even then you may not believe it, but you won't be forgetting the experience anytime soon. The **most intelligent show** is put on by Penn & Teller, and we are grateful. The **best magic show** is Lance Burton at Monte Carlo. The **best classic Vegas topless revue** is *Jubilee!* at Bally's. The **best we aren't sure what the heck to call it, but you should really try to see it** is Blue Man Group, at their new home at The Venetian. The **So Glad It's Here** award goes to *Spamalot* because the world is always better with a little Python in it.

days at Caesars Palace, you owe it to yourself to see it (even if the top $275 ticket prices are way on the ridiculous side—it's such a good show that it's worth saving up for). **Stevie Nicks** also does a couple of stints at Caesars throughout the year. Similarly, **Reba McEntire** was doing a bunch of shows at the Las Vegas Hilton when Barry Manilow isn't there. As we write this, there is a hot rumor going that Cher will be alternating in some way with Bette Midler.

Note: Shows can close without warning, even ones that have been running just shy of forever, so please call first. Note also that some ticket prices may not include tax or drinks, so you might also check for those potential hidden costs.

American Superstars ★ *Kids* One of a number of celebrity impersonator shows (well, it's cheaper than getting the real headliners), *American Superstars* is one of the few where said impersonators actually sing live. Five performers do their thing; the celebs impersonated vary depending on the evening.

A typical Friday night featured Christina Aguilera, Britney Spears, Tim McGraw, Michael Jackson, and Elvis. The performers won't be putting the originals out of work any time soon, but they aren't bad. Actually, they were closer in voice than in looks to the celeb in question, which is an unusual switch for Vegas impersonators. The youngish crowd (by Vegas standards) included a healthy smattering of children and seemed to find no faults with the production. Sunday through Tuesday 7pm; Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday 6:30 and 8:30pm. In the Stratosphere Casino Hotel & Tower, 2000 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **800/99-TOWER** or 702/380-7711. www.stratospherehotel.com. Tickets $42

adults, $31 children 5–12; show and buffet package $50 (includes taxes and fees, package includes 2 drinks and tower admission).

An Evening at La Cage No, it wasn't inspired by the French movie or the American remake, or even the Broadway musical. Actually, it's more like the stage show derived from the movie *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert.* Female impersonators dress up as various entertainers (with varying degrees of success) to lip-sync to those celebrity entertainers' greatest hits (with varying degrees of success). The celebs lampooned can include Céline Dion (one of the funniest moments, as they accurately parody her show down the Strip), Cher, Bette Midler, Judy Garland, Britney Spears, and, intriguingly, Michael Jackson. A Joan Rivers impersonator, looking not unlike the original but sounding not at all like her, is the hostess, delivering scatological phrases and jokes both current and that have been in the show for years. It's really close to being good without quite getting there. But it's been running forever, so for some folks, they are doing something right. Wednesday through Monday at 7:30pm. In The Riviera Hotel & Casino, 2901 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **877/892-7469** or 702/794-9433. www.rivierahotel.com. Ages 12 and over only. Tickets $55–$65 (plus tax).

Bette Midler In February 2008, the Divine Miss M brings her delicious self to a 2-year-plus residency in Caesars, taking over Céline Dion's remarkable run. The Coliseum venue was built just for Céline, but the diva has left the building. Midler's bawdy jokes and belting vocals belie her 60-something age, as she delivers a classic *show.* You know, singing, dancing, joke telling, charisma, not to mention mermaid costumes and Sophie Tucker homages. Ticket prices are high for the good seats, to be sure, but the dame delivers. There will be 100 shows throughout the year, usually in 4-week blocks, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday through Sunday at 8pm. In Caesars Palace, 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **877/7BETTEM,** or through www.ticketmaster.com. Tickets $95–$250 (plus booking fee).

Blue Man Group ★★★ Are they blue? Indeed they are—three hairless, non-speaking men dipped in azure paint, doing decidedly odd stunts with marshmallows, art supplies, audience members, tons of paper, and an amazing array of percussion instruments fashioned fancifully from PVC piping. If that doesn't sound very Vegas, well, it's not. It's the latest franchise of a New York–born performance-art troupe. There are no acrobatics or flowing choreography, and no attempt to create an alternate universe, just a series of unconnected bits. But even if the whole is no greater than the sum

Give Our Regards to Broadway

Historically, genuine theater hasn't fared all that well on the Strip. But we are pleased to report that curtains have gone up on several Broadway favorites in the last year or so, setting a trend we hope will continue. Granted, these shows have been timmed down to 90 minutes (the better to avoid intermissions and get patrons back in the casinos where they belong), but some of the editing was actually all for the better. And how can we protest some general culture making its way to Sin City. We review our favorite of the Broadway babies, ***Monty Python's Spamalot***, below, but here are two more selections to choose from:

- ***Mamma Mia!*** ★★, in Mandalay Bay (✆ 877/632-7400; www.mandalaybay.com; Tickets $45–$100) is fluffy, but cute. The cast is earnest, and Swedish '70s wonder group ABBA wrote songs that we have to admit, 30 years on, are still mighty infectious. It runs Sunday through Thursday at 7:30pm, Saturday at 6 and 10pm.
- ***Phantom of the Opera,*** in The Venetian (✆ 866/641-7469 or 702/414-7469; www.venetian.com; Tickets $82–$157), is a heavy-on-the-special-effects staging of Andrew Lloyd Webber's ubiquitous musical. It's over-the-top, but then, so is Vegas, and this seems like a good fit. It runs Monday through Saturday at 7pm; Monday and Saturday at 9:30pm; and Thursday at 10pm.

of the parts, the parts are pretty great themselves. The Blue Man Group theater at The Venetian is not quite as comfy as its former home at Luxor, but most folks are so amused by the onstage antics that they forget about elbowroom. Nightly at 7:30pm, with an additional 10:30pm show on Saturdays. At The Venetian, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **866/641-7469** or 702/414-7469. www.venetian.com. Tickets $85–$110 (plus tax and service fees).

Cirque du Soleil's *KÀ* ★★★ *Kids* Our initial reaction to the opening of this was, "Is there anything else Cirque can possibly *do?*" The answer is "Apparently, yes."

To begin with, *KÀ* subverts expectations by largely eschewing the usual Cirque format in favor of an actual plot, as a brother and

sister from some mythical Asian kingdom are separated by enemy raiders and have to endure various trials and tribulations before being reunited. Gleefully borrowing imagery from magical realist martial arts movies such as *Hero* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,* the production makes use of a technically extraordinary set that shifts the stage not just horizontally but vertically. The circus elements—acrobats, clowns—are incorporated into the show in a way that makes some loose narrative sense, though this does mean that the physical stunts are mostly pretty rather than feats of derring-do, and between the stage's antics and the clever lighting effects, the show is more about hydraulics than humans.

Except there really is a story, and it is by turns funny, tragic, and whimsical. It might be a little long and intense for younger children, but older ones will be enthralled—and so will you. Don't sit here reading this any longer; go see it. Friday through Tuesday at 7:30 and 10:30pm. In the MGM Grand, 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **866/774-7117** or 702/531-2000. www.cirquedusoleil.com. Tickets $99–$150 (plus tax).

Cirque du Soleil's *LOVE* ★ *Kids* A collaboration between The Beatles (by way of Sir George Martin's son, who remixed and reconfigured the music with a free hand that may distress purists) and Cirque du Soleil, this is the usual Cirque triumph of imaginative design, but it feels surprisingly hollow. In one sense, it's an inspired pairing, in that The Beatles' music provides an apt vehicle for Cirque's trademark exuberant, joyous spectacle. But while Cirque shows have never been big on plot, the particular aimlessness of this production means that the show too quickly dissolves into simply the introduction of one creative, novel staging element after another. In other words, its visual fabulousness ends up repetitious rather than thrilling. Beatles fans—though who, at this stage in the game, is not, really?—will probably still have a good time, but others may wish to spend their Cirque money on one of the other options. Daily 7:30 and 10:30pm. At The Mirage, 3400 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **800/963-9637** or 702/792-7777. www.beatles.com. Tickets $69–$150 (plus tax).

Cirque du Soleil's *Mystère* ★★★ *Kids* The in-house ads for *Mystère* (miss-*tair*) say "Words don't do it justice," and for once, that's not just hype. The show is so visual that trying to describe it is a losing proposition.

Cirque du Soleil began in Montréal as a unique circus experience, not only shunning traditional animal acts in favor of gorgeous feats of human strength and agility, but also adding elements of the surreal and the absurd. The result seems like a collaboration between

Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel, with a few touches by Magritte and choreography by Twyla Tharp. MGM MIRAGE has built the troupe its own theater, an incredible space with an enormous dome and super-hydraulics that allow for the Cirque performers to fly in space. Or so it seems. The show features one simply unbelievable act after another (seemingly boneless contortionists and acrobats, breathtakingly beautiful aerial maneuvers), interspersed with dadaist/commedia dell'arte clowns, and everyone clad in costumes like nothing you've ever seen before. All this and a giant snail!

The show is dreamlike, suspenseful, funny, erotic, mesmerizing, and just lovely. At times, you might even find yourself moved to tears. For some children, however, it might be a bit too sophisticated and arty. Even if you've seen Cirque before, it's worth coming to check out, thanks to the large production values. It's a world-class show, no matter where it's playing. Catch it Wednesday through Saturday 7:30 and 10:30pm, Sunday 4:30 and 7:30pm. In TI–Treasure Island, 3300 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **800/963-9634** or 702/796-9999. www.cirquedusoleil.com. Tickets $60–$95 (plus tax).

Cirque du Soleil's *O* ★★★ How to describe the seemingly indescribable wonder and artistry of Cirque du Soleil's latest and most dazzling display? An Esther Williams–Busby Berkeley spectacular on peyote? A Salvador Dalí painting come to life? A stage show by Fellini? The French troupe has topped itself with this production—and not simply because it's situated its breathtaking acrobatics in, on, around, and above a 1.5-million-gallon pool (*eau*—pronounced *O*—is French for "water"). If you've never seen a Cirque show, prepare to have your brain turned inside out. We know—those ticket prices—*ouch.* We want to say that we can guarantee it's worth it, but that's a decision only you can make. (Though no one we've personally sent has come back regretting that they went.) But we can say this: Watch this show, and you know where a good chunk of the money is going (in other words, they spend a bundle nightly to mount this thing). Note that no tank tops, shorts, or sneakers are allowed. Wednesday through Sunday 7:30 and 10:30pm. In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **888/488-7111** or 702/693-7722. www.cirquedusoleil.com. Tickets $99–$150 (plus tax).

Crazy Girls *Crazy Girls,* presented in an intimate theater, is probably the raciest revue on the Strip. It features sexy showgirls with perfect bodies in erotic song-and-dance numbers enhanced by innovative lighting effects. Think of *Penthouse* poses coming to life. Perhaps it was best summed up by one older man from Kentucky: "It's

okay if you like boobs and butt. But most of the girls can't even dance." Wednesday through Monday 9:30pm. In The Riviera Hotel & Casino, 2901 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **877/892-7469** or 702/794-9433. www.rivierahotel.com. Ages 18 and over only. Tickets $35–$60 (plus tax); dinner and show packages available.

Danny Gans: *The Man of Many Voices* ★★ In a town where the consistent sellouts are costly, elaborate extravaganzas, it's a tribute to Danny Gans's charisma and appeal that his one-man variety act can draw the same crowds with nothing more than a backup band and a few props. Gans is "the man of many voices"—more than 400 of them—and his show features impressions of 80 different celebrities, usually a different mix each night depending on audience demographics.

The emphasis is on musical impressions (everyone from Sinatra to Springsteen), with some movie scenes (Hepburn and Fonda from *On Golden Pond,* Tom Hanks in *Forrest Gump*) thrown in. Gans's vocal flexibility is impressive, though his impersonations are hit-or-miss (his Springsteen needs work). That said, when we last saw him, he did a dead-on impression of comedian Jeff Foxworthy that had the crowd rolling, a hilarious bit involving George Burns imitating MC Hammer, and a somewhat freaky, but totally on-target impression of Macy Gray. He's a consistent crowd-pleaser, and the lack of bombast can be a refreshing change of pace. Wednesday and Friday through Saturday at 8pm. In The Mirage, 3400 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **800/963-9634** or 702/792-7777. www.mirage.com. Tickets $100 (including tax).

Folies Bergère ★★ The longest-running production show in town has recently undergone a "sexier than ever" face-lift, but the result is far from that. It's more like tamed-down burlesque, as done by a college drama department. Bare breasts pop up (sorry) at odd moments (late shows only): not during the cancan line, but rather during a fashion show and an en-pointe ballet sequence. The effect is neither erotic nor titillating, suggesting only that absent-minded dancers simply forgot to put their shirts on. The dance sequences (more acrobatics than true dance) range from the aforementioned ballet and cancan to jazz and hoedown, and are only occasionally well costumed. A coyly cute '50s striptease number on a *Hollywood Squares*–type set is more successful, as is a clever and funny juggling act (don't miss his finale with the vest and hat). Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday 7:30 (covered) and 10pm (topless); Tuesday and Friday 8:30pm (topless). In Tropicana Resort & Casino, 3801

Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **800/829-9034** or 702/739-2411. www.tropicanalv.com. Tickets $65–$76 (plus tax).

Jubilee! ★★★ A classic Vegas spectacular, crammed with singing, dancing, magic, acrobats, elaborate costumes and sets, and, of course, bare breasts. It's a basic revue, with production numbers featuring homogenized versions of standards (Gershwin, Cole Porter, some Fred Astaire numbers) sometimes sung live, sometimes lip-synched, and always accompanied by lavishly costumed and frequently topless showgirls. Humorous set pieces about Samson and Delilah and the sinking of the *Titanic* (!) show off some pretty awesome sets. The finale features aerodynamically impossible feathered and bejeweled costumes and headpieces designed by Bob Mackie. Note that *Jubilee!* offers a marvelous backstage walking tour Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays at 11am. Saturday through Thursday at 7:30 and 10:30pm. In Bally's Las Vegas, 3645 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **800/237-7469** or 702/739-4567. www.ballys.com. Ages 18 and over only. Tickets $48–$110 (plus tax).

Lance Burton: *Master Magician* ★★★ *Kids* Handsome and folksy (he hails from Lexington, Kentucky), the laconic Burton is talented and engaging, for the most part shunning the big-ticket special effects that seem to have swamped most other shows in town. Instead, he offers an extremely appealing production that starts small, with "close-up" magic. These lovely, precise tricks, he tells us, are what won him a number of prestigious magic competitions. They are truly extraordinary, we are told by other professional magicians. (We swear that he tossed a bird up in the air, and the darn thing turned into confetti in front of our eyes. Really.)

He does eventually move to bigger illusions, but his manner follows him—he knows the stuff is good, but he also knows the whole thing is a bit silly, so why not have fun with it? His longtime support act is comedian/juggler Michael Goudeau, who is not only perhaps the only genuinely funny and talented support act on the Strip, but can also juggle a beanbag chair, a chainsaw, and a peanut M&M all at once. All this and extremely comfortable movie theater–style plush seats with cup holders. Tuesday and Saturday at 7 and 10pm, Wednesday through Friday at 7pm. In the Monte Carlo Resort & Casino, 3770 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **877/386-8224** or 702/730-7160. www.montecarlo.com. Tickets $60–$73 (plus tax).

Le Rêve ★ Challenged from the get-go, thanks to a decision to base this Cirque-like around a stage of water, thus prompting inevitable comparisons with *O* down the street, this production is

receiving an ongoing major revamp, both in staging and choreography, to address some of the issues. By and large, the choices—particularly to get revered avant-garde choreographer and Momix genius Moses Pendleton to take over the choreography (thus increasing the presence of dance)—have been good ones. But the show still comes off as a copy rather than an original.

Le Rêve, named for the most significant of the paintings owned by Steve Wynn, is an extravaganza featuring all the usual elements: gorgeously sculpted athletic performers who twist, contort, and mostly pose in filmy tattered outfits before and after diving in and splashing out of a giant pool. It's like the biggest, most impressive Esther Williams production you can imagine. Speaking of which, you may wish to avoid sitting in the front rows, unless you don't mind spending 90 minutes huddling under the provided towels—not only does the in-the-round staging mean the performers routinely splash water, but also that long, filmy costumes, when hauled out of said water and lifted high in the air, drip most impressively and most wetly on the first couple of rows. Because no seat is that far from the stage, and the farther back you are, the more of the complex imagery you can take, there really isn't a bad seat, so stay back and stay dry. Monday, Thursday, and Sunday 7 and 9:30pm; Friday at 8:30pm; and Saturday at 8 and 10:30pm. In Wynn Las Vegas, 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **888/320-7110.** www.wynnlasvegas.com. Ages 13 and over. Tickets $99–$159.

Mac King ★★★ *Value* One of the best entertainment values in Vegas, this is an afternoon comedy-magic show—and note order of precedence in that introduction. King does magic, thankfully, as far as we are concerned, emphasizing the only kind that's really mind-blowing these days—those close-up tricks that defy your eyes and mind. But he surrounds his tricks with whimsy and wit, and sometimes gut-busting guffaws, which makes you wonder how someone else can still perform stunts with a straight face. (Check out how he takes a $100 bill and—wait, we don't want to give it away, but suffice it to say it involves an old shoe, a Fig Newton, and several other unexpected props.) Perfect for the kids, perfect for the budget, perfect timing if you need something in the afternoon before an evening of gambling, dining, and cavorting. Then again, we are rather surprised he's still just an afternoon gig. One day, someone is going to wise up and move him to the big time, and his ticket prices will move up, too. So catch him while he's still a bargain. Tuesday through Saturday at 1 and 3pm. In Harrah's, 3475 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **800/427-7247.** www.harrahs.com. Tickets $25.

MGM Grand's *Crazy Horse Paris* ★★ Allegedly the same show that has been running for years in a famous racy French nightclub, this show is just a bunch of pretty girls taking their clothes off. Except that the girls are smashingly pretty, with the kind of bodies just not found on real live human beings, and they take their clothes off in curious and, yes, artistic ways, gyrating on pointe shoes while holding on to ropes or hoops, falling over sofas while lip-syncing to French torch songs—in short, it's what striptease ought to be, and by gosh, if strip clubs were this well staged, we'd go to them all the time. But $60 a ticket is a great deal to pay for arty nudie fun, especially when the routines, no matter how clever or how naked (the girls get down to a postage-stamp-size triangle soul patch covering the naughtiest of their bits, so they aren't "nude," but talk about a technicality), start to seem alike after a while. Wednesday through Monday at 8 and 10:30pm. In the MGM Grand, 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **877/880-0880** or 702/891-7777. www.mgmgrand.com. Ages 18 and over. Tickets $59 (plus tax).

Monty Python's *Spamalot* ★★★ One day, one former member of the famed Monty Python troupe got the idea of taking their movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and turning it into a Broadway musical. This was a completely ridiculous plan, right up until the moment it became a huge smash and won the Tony for Best Original Musical. This is a trimmed version of the much-lauded show, neatly Vegas-ized. Where the movie had been a spoof of the King Arthur legends, and the theatrical version was that plus a spoof of Broadway musical clichés, this version has fun at Vegas's expense, so the meta only grows. It's been over 30 years since the original movie, but the gags work as well as ever and mesh hilariously with new material. Part of the beauty of the design of the show is that all it needs are solid comic performers, plus the songs are surprisingly catchy. Naturally, dedicated fans can't resist shouting out favorite punch lines, but it only adds to the experience. Never been exposed to Python anarchy before? No worries. You need not know the Dead Parrot sketch by heart to enjoy this bit of fluffy yet subversive theater. Sunday, Monday, and Wednesday at 8pm; Friday, Saturday, and Tuesday at 7 and 10pm. In Wynn Las Vegas, 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **888/320-9966.** Tickets $49–$99.

Penn & Teller ★★★ *Moments* The most intelligent show in Vegas, as these two—magicians? illusionists? truth-tellers? BS artists? geniuses?—put on 90 minutes of, yes, magic and juggling, but also acerbic comedy, mean stunts, and great quiet beauty. Looking like

two characters out of Dr. Seuss, big, loud Penn and smaller, quiet Teller (to reduce them to their basic characteristics) perform magic, reveal the secrets behind a few major magic tricks, discuss why magic is nothing but a bunch of lies, and then turn around and show why magic is as lovely an art form as any other. We won't tell you much about the various tricks and acts, for fear of ruining punch lines, but watching Teller fish money out of an empty glass aquarium or play with shadows is to belie Penn's earlier caveats about learning how tricks are done—it doesn't ruin the wonder of it, not at all, nor the serenity that settles in your Vegas-sensory-overloaded brain. Saturday through Thursday at 9pm. In the Rio Hotel, 3700 W. Flamingo. ✆ **888/746-7784.** www.riolasvegas.com. Ages 5 and over only. Tickets $75–$85 (plus tax).

Rita Rudner ★★ She stands in front of an audience for about an hour and tells the truth. It's that simple. It's also funny as heck, and oddly endearing, as Rudner's successful shtick is to present herself as Every Woman, not to mention the audience's Best Friend Forever. She wryly and dryly tosses out one-liners about gender relationships in an attempt to explain that age-old problem—What Do Women Want? And Why Don't Men Understand It's Shoes? At Harrah's, 3475 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/369-5222.** Tickets $54–$105.

The Second City ★★ *Value* Second City is the Chicago-based comedy group that spawned not only *SCTV* but also some of the best modern-day comics (such as the late Gilda Radner and John Belushi, Martin Short, and Mike Myers). This is an improv comedy show, with cast members performing stunts similar to those you might have seen on *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*—you know, taking suggestions from the audience and creating bizarre little skits and such out of them, all of it done at lightning speed with wit and a wink. Some of it can turn R-rated, so be careful about bringing the kids, but do not hesitate to see it yourself. And join in—any improv group is only as good as the material fed it. One of the best values and highest-quality shows in Vegas. Monday, Tuesday, and Friday at 8pm and Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday at 8 and 10:30pm. In The Flamingo Las Vegas, 3555 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **800/221-7299** or 702/733-3333. www.secondcity.com. Tickets $45 (plus tax and fees).

Stomp Out Loud ★★ *Kids* A happy-go-lucky bunch of young people come on stage and make some noise. Lots of noise. They clap, they bang on trash cans, they—yes—stomp. There is nothing these percussion whizzes can't make a beat out of or even turn into primitive music. Why is this "out loud"? Apparently because the cast

is bigger, with 16 people, which makes it louder. Or something. Performers start with a set of push brooms and move to the aforementioned trash cans, plus water jugs, boxes, key rings, lighters (which makes for a great effect in a dark theater), even newspapers and garbage bags. The onstage joy is infectious, plus it's refreshing to see a racially and physically mixed cast, as opposed to the usual lineup of generic impossibly pretty people. Hardly mentally challenging, perhaps just a bit repetitious, and certainly not for those who would consider it all just noise, but it is as fun and funny as it is clever. Monday 6 and 9pm; Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, and Sunday 7pm; and Saturday 7 and 10pm. In Planet Hollywood, 3663 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **877/333-0474.** Tickets $50–$110.

Tournament of Kings *Kids* If you've seen the Jim Carrey movie *The Cable Guy,* you probably laughed at the scene in which the two protagonists go to a medieval dinner and tournament. Perhaps you thought it was satire, created just for the movie. You would be wrong. It's actually part of a chain, and something very like it can be found right here in Vegas, though in a new and improved version. Those of us who shuddered at the former incarnation find this new one to be, at worst, highly tolerable, and at times downright entertaining.

For a fixed price, you get a dinner that's better than you might expect (Cornish game hen, very fine baked potato, and more), which you eat with your hands (in keeping with the theme), while Merlin (or someone like him) spends too much time trying to work the crowd up with a singalong. This gives way to a competition among the kings of various medieval countries, competing for titles in knightly contests (jousting, horse races, and such) that are every bit as unrehearsed and spontaneous as a professional wrestling match. Eventually, good triumphs over evil and all that.

Each section of the arena is given a king to be the subjects of and to root for, and the audience is encouraged to hoot, holler, and pound on the tables, which kids love but teens will be too jaded for (though we know some from whom a spontaneous "way cool" slipped out a few times unchecked). Many adults might find it tiresome, particularly when they insist you shout "huzzah!" and other period slang. Acrobatics are terrific, and certain buff performers make for a different sort of enjoyment. Daily at 6 and 8:30pm. In Excalibur, 3850 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **800/933-1334** or 702/597-7600. www.excalibur.com. Tickets $55 (plus tax).

2 Headliner Showrooms

Vegas entertainment made its name with its showrooms, though its glory days are somewhat behind it, gone with the Rat Pack themselves. For a long time, Vegas headliners were something of a joke; only those on the downhill side of fame were thought to play there. But with all the new performance spaces—and high fees—offered by the new hotels, Vegas suddenly has credence again, especially, in of all things, the rock scene. Both the Hard Rock Hotel's The Joint and the House of Blues are attracting very current and very popular acts who find it hip, rather than humiliating, to play Sin City. However, the classic Vegas showroom itself does seem headed the way of the dinosaurs; many of the hotels have shuttered theirs. As for the remainder, one is pretty much like the other, with the exception of the Hard Rock and HOB (hence they are the only ones we bother to describe below), and in any case, audiences go based on the performer rather than the space itself. Check with your hotel or those free magazines in your room to see who is in town when you are.

Hard Rock Hotel's The Joint ★ Formerly just about the only game in town in terms of good rock bookings, The Joint, with its 1,400-seat capacity, faces some stiff competition from the House of Blues. On the other hand, it was here the Rolling Stones chose to do a show during their arena tour—this was the smallest venue the band had played in years, and, as you can imagine, it was one hot ticket. When the Hard Rock Hotel opened in 1995, the Eagles were the first act to appear. Since then the facility has presented Bob Dylan, Ziggy Marley, Marilyn Manson, Green Day, the Black Crowes, David Bowie, Donna Summer, Stephen Stills, Jimmy Cliff, Tears for Fears, Lyle Lovett, and James Brown. The venue is not a preferred one, however; it's worth going only if a favorite performer is playing or if it's an opportunity to see a big artist play a smaller-than-usual room.

At press time, The Joint was closed for an entire reconception; the club is changing locations, which will allow for a much larger space when it reopens in late 2008. Expect a bigger rival to the House of Blues, which outstripped its rival some time ago.

Showroom Policies: Smoking is permitted for some shows; seating is either preassigned or general, depending on the performer. **Price:** $20 to $250, depending on the performer (tax and drinks extra). **Showtimes:** Times and nights of performance vary. **Reservations:** You can reserve up to 30 days in advance. In the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, 4455 Paradise Rd. ✆ **800/693-7625** or 702/693-5000. www.hardrockhotel.com.

House of Blues ★★ With its entry into Las Vegas, the House of Blues is going head-to-head with The Joint at the Hard Rock Hotel, and the prospects for some great bookings due to competition are high. On its own merits, the House of Blues is a good, intimate room with a cozy floor surrounded by a bar area, and an upstairs balcony area that has actual theater seating. (The balcony might actually be a better place to see a show since the sightlines are unobscured, unlike down below, where posts and such can obstruct the view.) It's probably the most comfortable and user-friendly place to see a rock show in Vegas.

The heavy theme decor (a constant evocation of the Delta region and New Orleans) is a bit too Disneyland-meets-Hearst-Castle, with corrugated-tin this and weathered-wood that, plus walls covered in outsider/primitive/folk art from various Southern artists. But it annoys us less in Vegas than it does in New Orleans.

The House of Blues has rock and blues shows just about every night, and, as mentioned, nationally recognized acts are already flocking to the place, starting with Bob Dylan on opening night and continuing with shows by Seal, X, Garbage, Taylor Dane, Al Green, James Brown, the Go-Go's, the Neville Brothers, and even spoken word by Henry Rollins.

Showroom Policies: Smoking is permitted; seating is either preassigned or general, depending on the performer. (Some shows are all general admission, with everyone standing on the floor.) **Price:** $18 to $250, depending on the performer. **Showtimes:** Vary, but usually 8pm. **Reservations:** You can buy tickets as soon as shows are announced; lead time varies with each artist. In Mandalay Bay, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **877/632-7400** or 702/632-7600. www.hob.com.

3 The Bar Scene

In addition to the venues listed below, consider hanging out, as the locals quickly began doing, at **Aureole** ★★, **Red Square** ★★, and the **House of Blues** ★★, all in **Mandalay Bay** (p. 20).

You might also check out the incredible nighttime view at the bar atop the **Stratosphere Casino Hotel & Tower**—nothing beats it.

There's also the **Viva Las Vegas Lounge** at the Hard Rock Hotel, which every rock-connected person in Vegas will eventually pass through.

The Bar at Times Square ★ If you're looking for a quiet piano bar, this is not the place for you. It's smack in the middle of the Central Park part of the New York–New York casino. Two pianos

are going strong every night, and the young hipster, cigar-smoking crowd overflows out the doors. It always seems to be packed with a singing, swaying, drinking throng full of camaraderie and good cheer—or at least, full of booze. Hugely fun, provided you can get a foot in the door. Shows daily from 8pm to 2:15am. In New York–New York, 3790 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/740-6969.** Cover $10 daily after 8pm.

Double Down Saloon ✭✭✭ *Finds* "House rule: You puke, you clean." Okay, that about sums up the Double Down. Well, no, it doesn't really do the place justice. This is a big local hangout, with management quoting an old *Scope* magazine description of its clientele: "Hipsters, blue collars, the well-heeled lunatic fringe." Rumored to have been spotted here: director Tim Burton and the late Dr. Timothy Leary. Need to know more? Okay, trippy hallucinogenic graffiti covers the walls, the ceiling, the tables, and possibly you if you sit there long enough. The jukebox holds everything from the Germs and Frank Zappa to Link Wray, Dick Dale, and Reverend Horton Heat. On Wednesday night, they have a live blues band, while other nights might find local alternative, punk, or ska groups performing. There's no cover unless they have some out-of-town band that actually has a label deal. Open daily 24 hours. 4640 Paradise Rd. (at Naples Dr.). ✆ **702/791-5775.** www.doubledownsaloon.com.

Ivan Kane's Forty Deuce ✭✭ The brainchild of Los Angeles club impresario Ivan Kane, this is a supremely hot combo bar/nightclub/burlesque revue, a modern take on the classic girlie shows, featuring va-va-voom clever dancers (with shows every 90 min. for at least 15 min.—longer if there are more dancers) who strip down to little pasties, short-shorts, and g-strings. Drinks are obscenely expensive, and tables are entirely bottle service, and naturally, the view of the show is better from those seats. DJs spin between sets, and you can't fit a piece of paper inside on the weekends. The beautiful people love it, and we kind of do, too. Open Thursday through Monday from 10:30pm until dawn. Shows at 12:30am and 3am. In Mandalay Bay, 2950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/632-7000.** www.fortydeuce.com. Cover varies.

Eiffel Tower Bar ✭ From this chic and elegant room, in the restaurant on the 11th floor of the Eiffel Tower, you can look down on everyone (in Vegas)—just like a real Parisian! (Just kidding, Francophiles.) But really, this is a date-impressing bar, and, since there's no cover or minimum, it's a cost-effective alternative to the overly inflated food prices at the restaurant. Drop by for a drink, but try to look sophisticated. And then you can cop an attitude and dismiss

everything as *gauche*—or *droit,* depending on which way you are seated. A business-attire dress code is enforced after 4:30pm. Open daily 11am to 11pm. In Paris Las Vegas, 3655 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/948-6937.**

ghostbar ✪✪ Probably the most interesting aspect of this desperate-to-get-into-the-gossip-pages-as-the-trendy-bar-of-the-moment place (decorated with a '60s mod/futuristic silver-gleam look) is that though much is made of the fact that it's on the 55th floor, it's really on the 42nd. Something about the number 4 being bad luck in Asian cultures. Whatever. The view is still fabulous, which is the main reason to come here, that and to peer at those tousled-hair beauties copping an attitude on the couches and see if any of them have the kind of names that will make tomorrow's gossip pages. This may be the hot bar of the moment by the time you get here (dress up), or everyone may have moved on. Who knows? Open daily 8pm until dawn. In the Palms Resort & Casino, 4321 W. Flamingo Rd. (just west of the Strip). ✆ **702/938-2666.** Cover varies, usually $10 and up.

Napoleon's ✪✪ A formerly nice but rather sedate space near the back of the Paris Las Vegas shopping gallery has been transformed into a rollicking good-time venue with the addition of dueling piano performances. The bar is a mixture of French old-world charm and Las Vegas showmanship, done all in reds and dark browns with lots of comfy seating scattered about. The pianists play daily 9pm to 1am. In Paris Las Vegas, 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/946-7000.**

Peppermill's Fireside Lounge ✪ *Finds* Walk through the classic Peppermill's coffee shop (not a bad place to eat, by the way) on the Strip, and you land in its fabulously dated view of hip bars. It has low, circular banquette seats, fake floral foliage, a whole bunch of pink neon, and electric candles. But best of all is the water and fire pit as the room's centerpiece—a piece of kitsch thought to be long vanished from earth, and attracting nostalgia buffs like moths to a flame. The neon (a recent edition, just adding to the wrongness of the decor) detracts somewhat from the fire-pit centerpiece, but it's still wonderfully retro for unwinding a bit after some time spent on the hectic Strip. The enormous, exotic froufrou tropical drinks (including the signature bathtub-size margaritas) will ensure that you sink into a level of comfortable stupor. Open daily 24 hours. 2985 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/735-4177.**

Petrossian ✪✪✪ Those despairing of a grown-up place to drink, a place for people who want a real cocktail made by people

who know that martinis really do require vermouth (none of this "just wave the bottle in the general direction of the glass" nonsense) and that "shaken not stirred" is a silly debate, rejoice and come here. Located just off the Bellagio lobby, this is one of the prettiest places to imbibe in the city. The bartenders are required to attend ongoing cocktail education, so they really know their stuff. Said stuff is made with the finest ingredients, which means none of the drinks come cheap. But the extra is worth it if you want it done right. They also have a good selection of high-end snacks. A little Beluga with your booze? In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/693-7111.**

Pussycat Dolls Lounge ★★ A Los Angeles novelty club act turned ubiquitous international stars, major brand, and reality TV show. Don't expect to see the recording stars perform in this lounge just off the PURE nightclub. (As if the difference between one pretty, vacuous face and plastic surgery–enhanced body and another is detectable anyway.) Still, the local gals strut their stuff (a couple of times an hour) well enough that you probably won't mind. Open daily at 5pm. In Caesars Palace, part of PURE. 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/731-7873.** Cover varies.

Sand Dollar Blues Lounge Here's a funky, no-decor (think posters and beer signs), atmosphere-intensive, slightly grimy, friendly bar. Just up the road from TI at The Mirage, this is a great antidote to artificial Vegas. Attracting a solid mix of locals and tourists, the Sand Dollar features live blues (both electric and acoustic, with a little Cajun and zydeco thrown in) every night. The dance floor is tiny and often full. The minimal cover always goes to the band. Drinks are happily affordable ($3 for a beer!). Depending on your desires, it's either refreshingly not Las Vegas or just the kind of place you came to Vegas to escape. Go before someone has the idea to build a theme hotel based on it. Open daily 24 hours. 3355 Spring Mountain Rd. (at Polaris Ave.). ✆ **702/871-6651.** www.sanddollarblues.com. No cover Sun–Tues; Wed–Sat $5–$7.

Triple 7 Brew Pub ★ *Finds* Stepping into this microbrew pub feels like stepping out of Vegas. Well, except for the dueling-piano entertainment. The place has a partially modern warehouse look (exposed pipes, microbrew fixtures visible through exposed glass at the back, and a very high ceiling), but a hammered-tin ceiling continues the hotel's Victorian decor; the overall effect seems straight out of San Francisco's North Beach. It's a bit on the yuppified side but escapes being pretentious. And frankly, it's a much-needed modern space for the Downtown area. This place has its own brew

master and a number of microbrews ready to try, and if you want a quick bite, there's also an oyster-and-sushi bar, plus fancy burgers and pizzas. It can get noisy during the aforementioned piano-duel act, but otherwise casino noise stays out. Since all of Downtown is too heavy on the Old Las Vegas side (which is fine, but not *all* the time), this is good for a suitable breather. Open daily from 11am to 7am. In Main Street Station, 200 N. Main St. ✆ **702/387-1896.**

4 Dance Clubs

In addition to the options listed below, country-music fans might want to wander on in to **Toby Keith's I Love This Bar & Grill,** Harrah's, 3475 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (✆ **702/369-5084**), not for the grill part—the food is definitely on the overpriced and unexceptional side—but for the bar portion of the program, with live entertainment Wednesday through Sunday from 9pm to 2am. The eponymous owner has been known to drop in and play from time to time.

Body English ★★ To our way of thinking, this is exactly what a Las Vegas club should be—because all the other hot nightclubs in town look exactly like a hot nightclub in any old town, and so we always want Vegas places to be *Vegas*—over-the-top and just a little bit wrong. So this clash of Anne Rice and Cher Gothic–themed wacky decadence, with fabrics on top of wood on top of mirrors, not to mention the sort of layout that allows for intimate corners and voyeuristic balcony viewing of the dance floor, is just the sort of overly rich dessert of a place we crave. So do many others; it's one of the hottest spots in town, and the wait in line is so long you might well polish off a Rice novel while standing in it. Well, you gotta pass the time somehow. Expect a hefty cover charge, too. Open Friday through Sunday 10pm to 4:30am. In the Hard Rock Hotel, 4455 Paradise Rd. ✆ **702/693-5000.** www.bodyenglish.com. Cover varies, but can be as high as $30.

Jet ★★ This 2006 addition to The Mirage is stunning, with three dance floors, each with its own vibe and musical style, and four bars on multiple levels to keep you entertained and give you something to look at. Wildly successful if you are of a certain age, but the combination of higher-than-average cover charges and the "club of the moment" vibe can be a bit exhausting for anyone looking for a slightly less competitive experience. If that's you, visit Light instead. Open Friday, Saturday, and Monday from 10:30pm until 4am. In The Mirage, 3400 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/792-7900.** Cover varies, usually $30.

PURE ✯✯ The biggest club on the Strip, PURE is everything a big, loud nightclub ought to be. People line up hours before opening for the chance to share in the mayhem. (This is the place where Britney passed out on New Year's instead of completing her hostess duties, while Christina Aguilera held an after-show party here.) The theme is reflected in the decor—or lack of it, since just about everything is as white as Ivory Soap (get the name?)—which is either minimalist brilliant or reflects the fact that even Vegas designers get tired. In any event, the noise and lack of cushy corners means this is a definite get-your-booty-in-motion kind of place, though there is ample space (seriously, there are airline hangers that are smaller) for just standing around watching other booties in motion. There is also a rooftop club, itself bigger than most regular Vegas clubs, with views of the Strip, for those who need a little fresh air. Open Friday through Sunday and Tuesday from 10pm to 4am. In Caesars Palace, 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/731-7110.** Cover varies.

Rain Nightclub ✯✯ At press time, it's still one of the hottest nightclubs in Vegas. Which means you (and we—don't think we aren't standing there with you, shoulder-to-shoulder in solidarity) probably will spend most of your time trying to convince someone, anyone, to let you in—you and a couple thousand size-2 Juicy Couture jeans–clad 20-somethings who feel they will simply cease to exist if they don't get inside. We smirk and snicker at their desperation because it makes us feel superior. But we also have to be honest; if you can brave the wait, the crowds, and the attitude, you will be inside a club that has done everything right, from the multilevel layout that allows them to pack the crowds in and allows those crowds to peer up and down at their brethren, to DJs who play the right house and techno cuts (at a pulse-thumping tempo, so don't expect your good pickup lines to be overheard), to the scaffolding that holds pyrotechnic and other mood-revvers, to the ubiquitous-of-late go-go girls dressed like strippers. If this is your choice, then note that they start lining up way before the opening time. Open Friday and Saturday from 11pm until 5am. 4321 W. Flamingo Rd. ✆ **702/940-7246.** Cover usually $25.

rumjungle ✯ Now, normally our delicate sensibilities wince at such overkill, and we tend to write off such efforts as just trying a bit too hard. But surprisingly, rumjungle really delivers the great fun it promises. The fire-wall entrance gives way to a wall of water; the two-story bar is full of the largest collection of rum varieties anywhere, each bottle illuminated with a laser beam of light; go-go girls

dance and prance between bottles of wine to dueling congas; and the food all comes skewered on swords. It's all a bit much, but it works, it really does. A great deal of thought went into the various clever designs and schemes, and it's paid off. Almost instantly, rumjungle became and stayed one of the hottest clubs in Vegas, with lines of partiers out the door every night, ready to dance to live world-beat music. Get there early (before 10pm) to avoid lines/guest lists/the cover charge, and consider having dinner (served until 11pm); it's costly, but it's a multicourse, all-you-can-eat feast of flame pit–cooked Brazilian food. For the amount of food and the waiving of the cover charge, dinner is a good deal. Then dance it off all night long! (The club is open 'til 2am on weeknights, 'til 4am Thurs–Sat nights.) In Mandalay Bay, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/632-7408.** Cover $20–$25.

Seamless After Hours ★★ Proving that the line between the latest hot nightclub and the latest hot strip club is getting blurred to the point of invisibility, by day, and much of the night, this is a strip club. But around 4am the girls leave the stage and morph into slightly more-clad go-go dancers, while the tables and chairs are cleared for a dance floor that is the site of the most intense after-hours action in Vegas. It's ingenious, because with some exceptions, most of even the hottest clubs are closing around the same time, and not everyone wants to go to a strip bar to continue the party. Said party goes on until everyone gives up, which can be as late as noon the next day, whereupon the girls reappear and their clothes again disappear. 4740 S. Arville St. ✆ **702/227-5200.** Cover $20.

Tao Nightclub ★ As of this writing, one of the hottest of the Vegas hot spots. Yes, that has been mentioned in other reviews here, and yes, it changes on an almost daily basis, but welcome to the Las Vegas club scene. Done as a Buddhist temple run amok, this multi-level club is drawing the party faithful and the celebrity entourages in droves, so expect long lines and high cover charges. Some may find the wall-to-wall crowds, flashing lights, pounding music, and general chaos overwhelming, but Tao is obviously doing something right. Open Tuesday through Saturday from 10pm until dawn. At The Venetian, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. S. ✆ **702/388-8588.** Cover varies.

5 Gay Bars

Hip and happening Vegas locals know that some of the best scenes and dance action can actually be found in the city's gay bars. And no, they don't ask for sexuality ID at the door. All are welcome at

any of the following establishments—as long as you don't have a problem with the people inside, they aren't going to have a problem with you. For women, this can be a fun way to dance and not get hassled by overeager lotharios. (Lesbians, by the way, are just as welcome at any of the gay bars.)

If you want to know what's going on in gay Las Vegas during your visit, pick up a copy of the ***Las Vegas Bugle,*** a free gay-oriented newspaper that's available at any of the places described below. Or call them at ✆ **702/369-6260.** Gay nightlife listings can also be found on the Web at **www.gaylasvegas.com** or **www.gayvegas.com**.

Gipsy ✰✰ For years, Gipsy reigned supreme as the best gay dance place in the city, and for good reason: great location (Paradise Rd. near the Hard Rock), excellent layout (sunken dance floor and two bars), and very little competition. A few years ago, some fierce competition stole some of its spotlight, along with a good portion of the clientele, and so the Gipsy fought back with a $750,000 renovation that seemed to recapture past glories. The drink specials, along with special events, shows, male dancers, and theme nights, make this place a good party bar. Open daily from 10pm to dawn. 4605 Paradise Rd. (at Naples Dr.). ✆ **702/731-1919.** www.gipsylv.net. Cover varies but is usually $5 and up on weekends, less or even free on weekdays.

Krave ✰✰ Most notably the first gay club on the Strip, not that anyone's admitting it's a gay club anymore, using "alternative" as the winking buzzword. The result is a more mixed crowd than you might get at other, openly gay clubs. The interior is a well-crafted Gothic explosion, with a dance floor and some go-go platforms that can feature dancers of either gender. Overall, a tossup; clearly, more money is going into the place, and the Strip access is important since most other local gay bars take some doing to get to. On the other hand, it has limited hours and a possibly even more competitive crowd. Note that if you don't pay the club valet, you have to park in the regular hotel parking, and that calls for a long jog through the evening-deserted Desert Passage shopping mall, which might be uncomfortable in club togs—limited access may well explain why there have already been two failed nightclubs in this space. Open daily except Monday from 8pm until late (after-hours until dawn Fri and Sat). At Planet Hollywood Hotel & Casino, 3667 Las Vegas Blvd. S. (entrance on Harmon). ✆ **702/836-0830.** www.kravelasvegas.com. Cover varies.

6 Strip Clubs

An essential part of the Vegas allure is decadence, and naked flesh would certainly qualify, as would the thrill of trying something new and daring. Of course, by and large, the nicer bars aren't particularly daring, and if you go to more than one in an evening, the thrill wears off, and the breasts don't look quite so bare.

Cheetah's ✪ This is the strip club used as the set in the movie *Showgirls,* but thanks to the magic of Hollywood and later renovations by the club, only the main stage will look vaguely familiar to those few looking for Nomi Malone. There's also a smaller stage, plus three tiny "tip stages" so that you can really get close to (and give much money to) the woman of your choice. Eight TVs line the walls; the club does a brisk business during major sporting events. The management believes "If you treat people right, they will keep coming back," so the atmosphere is friendlier than at other clubs. They "encourage couples—people who want to party—to come here. We get a 21- to 40-aged party kind of crowd," the manager told us. Indeed, there is a sporty, frat-bar feel to the place. (Though on a crowded Sat night, some unescorted women were turned away, despite policy.) Lap dances are $20. Open daily 24 hours. 2112 Western Ave. ✆ **702/384-0074.** Topless. Cover $30 after 8pm until early morning.

Sapphire Gentleman's Club ✪✪✪ Ladies and gentlemen (particularly the latter), Las Vegas, home of the largest everything else, now brings you—drum roll—the largest strip club *in the world!* That's right, 71,000 square feet of nakedity. Of course, you have to see it—and, of course, that's what they are counting on. But let's say this: While really it's nothing you haven't seen before strip-club-wise, if you haven't seen a strip club, this is the place to start (though the size and looks are atypical, to say the least; it's all downhill from here) because it's modern and clean, and, frankly, it's not all that different, looks-wise, from Rain, the super-hot nightclub over at the Rio, except that here you can actually hear yourself think, and the girls sometimes wear more clothes than at Rain. It's also more friendly and less attitudinal.

Expect three stages in a bridge shape (including one where gawkers who paid for the privilege can watch the action from below, thanks to a glass floor), and a fourth in a separate, and still large, room, with several poles and strippers all working it at the same time. Giant video screens occasionally act as a JumboTron for the

action on the other side of the cavernous room. Upstairs are incredibly posh and incredibly expensive rooms for wealthy sports and movie figures to utilize. Oh, and ladies are not only allowed to visit, but they'll also have their very own male strippers to leer at. Lap dances start at $20. Open daily 24 hours. 3025 S. Industrial. ✆ **702/796-6000.** Unescorted women allowed. Topless. Cover $30 from 6pm–6am.

Treasures ★★★ Right now, along with Sapphire, this is our favorite of the strip clubs, for several reasons. From the outside, this looks like one of the new fancy casino-hotels (if considerably smaller), but inside it's straight out of a Victorian sporting house (that's a brothel, by the way), down to replicas of 19th-century girlie pictures on the walls. On stage, the performers actually perform; anyone who has witnessed the desultory swaying of the hips and vacant stare of a bored, can't-be-bothered stripper will appreciate not just the bump-and-grind (some of which gets on the raunchy side) dance routines but also the special effects, from hair-blowing fans to smoke machines to a neon pole, that makes it all the more memorable. We are suckers for this combination of period-inspired style and contemporary approach to the business at hand. However, and we don't mean this in an off-putting way, "suckers" is a word to bear in mind; this is a place of commerce, and any adult-industry operation this professional knows it. Try not to forget that, especially couples and first-timers, for whom this is still an excellent and comfortable venue. ***Note:*** The entrance to the parking lot can be hard to spot after dark. Go down Highland and keep your eyes peeled. Lap dances $10 and up. Open Sunday through Thursday 4pm to 6am, and Friday and Saturday 4pm to 9am. 2801 Westwood Dr. ✆ **702/257-3030.** No unescorted women. Topless. Cover $45 and up (includes drinks).

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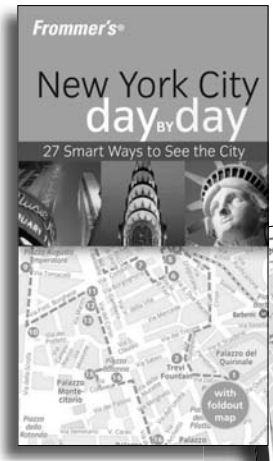

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